

THE BIG FISH

H.B. MARRIOTT WATSON





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THE BIG FISH



“What did I say?” I asked, drawing her gently to me.

FRONTISPIECE. See page 242.

✓ THE BIG FISH

BY

H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON ✓

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"THE CASTLE BY THE SEA," ETC.

✓ WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

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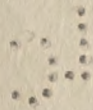
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THE BIG FISH

CHAPTER I

IN THE AUCTION ROOM

I HAD left my club that day somewhere between three and four of the afternoon, and I made my way northward through the narrow channel of Bond Street as far as Oxford Circus. There I deflected my course and wandered in a leisurely way down Oxford Street. It had been sultry and overcast all that full summer day, with an ominous blackness in the east; and now the murk opened, wreaths of white scud fringing it like feathers, and the storm belched on London. Within ten minutes the gutters were flooded and the pavements awash. The storm was tropical in its intensity. It was England's idea of a summer — two fine days — you know the adage. While here was the thunder-storm, with a cataclysm.

The streets cleared in a twinkling; there were flying flashes of raiment, a surge of black coats, the noise of splashing and trampling, and then emptiness, silence save only when Heaven blared overhead in rolling volleys of thunder. I took refuge at the outset in the open auction room.

You know these Oxford Street rooms in which a conspicuous sale is conducted from year's end to the

other. Auctioneers, public, and lots take their places in relays, but the sale goes on for ever. It is immortal; it is a never-pausing stream. All ranks, all walks of life, all trades and callings contribute to its flow and volume. Here is a bankrupt stock, here are the superfluities of rich houses, here are the household goods of departing families, here, too, are the effects of estates wound up "by order of the executors." China collections and select and valuable possessions find their way naturally to the superior marts of world-wide fame; but these establishments deal with average and ordinary chattels, and deal with them on a generous, wholesale, large-handed scale.

The press of people who either were potential purchasers, or had like myself sought refuge from the rain, was considerable. I looked about me idly. A sleek, hawk-faced, dark auctioneer, with an ingratiating manner, on the rostrum, rows of indifferent faces, a steam and smell of damp clothes, a passive-visaged man mechanically displaying before the rostrum a couple of ugly, modern, china vases — there was nothing here that would have suggested for a moment any connection with romance. It was a dull, prosaic scene such as was witnessed all day and every day in haunts of this kind. . . .

Against a wall stood several pieces of furniture, tables, chairs, bureaus and the like, each with its number. They were "lots"; this was the house of lots. Upon one of the tables was a small, lacquered box, obviously Japanese and apparently of some antiquity. Most of the furniture "going," as the

phrase is, was crudely modern, useful no doubt, but raw in its modernity. I think that was why I took notice of the box, which was labelled 301. A lane opened in the crowd just then, and I pushed along it toward the door beyond which the gloom seemed lifting; but I had not gone very far when a crack shattered the sky right above us, and the rain streamed out of the wrack fiercer than ever. It splashed and leaped from the pavement. Clearly the street was no place for any pedestrian just yet.

I turned back, this time upon the other side of the room, and by the opposite wall. Here, too, furniture was disposed in a more or less orderly array.

“What shall I say for this?”

“By your leave, gentlemen, if you please.”

The auctioneer with his stereotyped smile was brandishing a hammer. Two assistants, having cut their way through the crowd, were carrying off a sideboard towards the rostrum.

“What shall we say for this?”

The press closed again about the departing sideboard, and I found myself pushed against an oak writing-table, heavily carved by modern German hands. The edge stuck into my side, and I twisted about, and saw what rested on it. It was a lacquered box of a similar pattern to that upon the other side of the room. “Lot 346” was inscribed upon it. I wondered by what clerical stupidity the two had been dissociated. To bracket the two pieces in one lot was the obvious thing to do. I picked this one up and examined it. It seemed to me, judging from what small knowledge I had of antiques, to have been

a lady's toilet box. Its lid opened with a key and showed two compartments, in one of which was a little brass pot which, recently used for ink, had once probably held powder or paint. I closed the lid, and looked out at the street. A clap of thunder burst, it seemed, at the very door. I shrugged my shoulders, and turned my attention to the man in the rostrum.

"Any advance on thirty-one and six?" The hammer fell softly.

"Lot 301; an antique Japanese lacquer-work box. Here you have it, gentlemen, a very fine specimen of oriental work, as any one can see. The price of Japanese work is advancing every year. This is real old work. Pass it round, Williams."

The mechanical assistant moved within his narrow confines from verge to verge, with the box I had noticed on the other side of the room upon his up-raised and flattened palm.

"What shall we say?" invited the auctioneer.

The room had thinned just about me, and some paces in front I noticed two men in conversation. One was a short, moon-faced, rubicund fellow, square of body and thickset, heavy limbed and dwarfed, with a suggestion of physical power. The other was lean and tall, with a scanty, uneven beard grizzled in parts, and a fidgety way with him in his talk as he bent over his companion and gesticulated. My eyes were on this strangely assorted pair when I saw the square-set man open his mouth.

"Thirty bob."

The bidding passed from him to others, and mounted by shillings. It was evident that the

auctioneer had either no great opinion of the lot, or no hope of the audience.

“Thirty-six I’m bid.”

The square-set man had been engaged in talk with his friend, and now nodded at the rostrum.

“Thirty-seven, thank you. Thirty-eight there, in two places.”

The lean man gesticulated again. It looked as if he were urging his companion to bid again, but the latter only grinned, and shook his head. At forty some one flagged the bidding, and then the thickset man stepped in.

“Forty-five,” he said deliberately.

“Forty-five! Thank you.” The auctioneer accepted the jump with a bow. He recognized a determined purchaser. So apparently did the spectators, for no opposition was offered — the hammer fell at forty-five. The thickset man had employed exemplary tactics.

A few minutes later they had disappeared. The sale was grinding on its way. Outside the rain was clearing off, and I should be at liberty in a few minutes. If the rain had ceased five minutes earlier — well, it is idle work to speculate on the chances of fortune which are only chances because we do not understand them.

The auctioneer was consulting his clerk in inaudible exchanges.

“Three hundred and thirty, three hundred and thirty-one, down to three hundred and forty-five, no lot, gentlemen. Three hundred and forty-six, a — oh, an antique lacquered box. Get it, Williams.”

The man was hunting in my neighborhood and passed me with the second box from the oak bureau.

"Why, it's the twin of the one we had just now. Well, what shall we say? Shall we start it where the other left off?"

Some one bid a sovereign; and by shillings the price advanced to thirty shillings. It seemed cheap at that, and I jumped into the competition. My bid was swept up by the auctioneer, and swamped at once. I was at one end of the see-saw up to thirty-eight shillings, and then, following the example set by the dwarf, I leaped to two guineas. The tactics answered in this case also. At two guineas I became the owner of the "antique Japanese lacquered box."

By the time I had paid over my money to the clerk, and secured my purchase, the sky had cleared, and I went toward the door. I was vaguely conscious of the dwarf again, and realized that he was engaged in conversation with the auctioneer's clerk. I was therefore astonished to find both him and his friend, the lean man, planted in my path before the door.

"I reckon, sir, we'd like to do a deal with you over what you carry there," blurted out the lean man. He spoke in a high-pitched, rasping voice, which somehow rubbed me the wrong way, and I daresay my expression showed my antagonism, for the other thrust him into the background with a gesture. His voice was soft, soothing, and equably rich.

"Excuse me, sir, I purchased a lacquered box in here a little while ago. Inadvertently I overlooked the other. They were a pair and I lost the other by a piece of stupidity, for which I have only myself to

thank. I learned from the clerk that you had the second box and I thought you might be open to an offer." He waved his big fat hand to the lean man with a smile. "My friend is an enthusiastic connoisseur."

The explanation sufficed, but as I looked at them I was once more affected by the oddness of their conjunction. The lean man's eyes were hungry and even threatening, as I interpreted them. I shifted the lacquered box under my arm in a leisurely way.

"I'm very sorry," I said, "but I took a fancy to this box."

The broad man looked at me whimsically. "So did I," he said. "I suppose it's a question of price, is n't it? I'm willing to give you double your bid to make a match for my mantelpiece."

Four guineas! I was n't tempted in the least. I only had the desire to see what would follow on my refusal.

"I really have a fancy for it," I demurred. "You know what a collector is."

"It is precisely because I do that I'm going to make the offer six guineas," he said, with a friendly smile.

"I'm afraid that would n't tempt me," I answered, smiling also.

He still smiled. "What price would you put on it, sir?"

"I want it," I said bluntly, determined to carry the bargaining to its uttermost limit.

"The other box is of no use to me without its mate," said he. "Will you take ten guineas?"

"No."

"Fifteen?" he said, in his mellow voice.

"I'm sorry." I moved as if to depart, but the lean man plucked his friend by the shoulders. His eyes were malicious and gleaming.

"Thank you very much," said the square man with imperturbable politeness, paying no heed to this intervention. "I must apologize for troubling you." He moved a step or two with the other clinging to his arm, and then turned again. "There is one thing I might ask of your courtesy," he said, as if on an afterthought. "Might I examine yours? I should like to see if the details of the work vary, and in what particulars."

"Why, certainly," I replied, and would have unwrapped my possession, but he stopped me.

"Pardon me, this is rather a crowded place, and I should be loath to inconvenience you. Would you mind crossing the road to the tavern there? It will not detain you more than a few minutes."

"I am at your service," I said, moved to this assent by a strong curiosity, which has always been characteristic of me.

We passed out together, crossed, and entered the wineshop, where we took seats about a small table. The dwarf called the waiter, and in a twinkling we had each a glass of champagne before us. I unwrapped the box, which the dwarf took.

"This is very good of you," he said. "My name is Werner."

"Mine is Poindexter," said I.

The lean man murmured something in his rasping

voice, but I did not catch what it was. I assumed he also was proffering the compliment of his name. While his friend scrutinized the box, I examined both. The lean man was roughly dressed in a Bohemian way, and wore a broad-brimmed hat; the other was tailored to a nicety, as far as his extraordinary frame would allow. He was scrupulously in fashion, which seemed to me rather ridiculous; for I could imagine him only rolling on a ship's deck, where his breadth and stability of bulk would conceivably have been of advantage to his balance.

"Yes," said he, opening the lid and eyeing the interior carefully, "I thought it. Maddock, let us have a look at the other, will you?"

At that Maddock opened the loose coat which covered his meager chest, and produced out of a huge inner pocket the second lacquered box, or rather the one I had seen first. The two were set on the table before me. They seemed to be identical in appearance.

"You see, Mr. Poindexter," said Werner, with a rueful smile, "why I was anxious to secure yours. They are an absolute match."

"I'm sorry," said I lightly; "can I make a bid for yours?"

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "One without the other—I would n't mind raising my offer to twenty."

Both looked at me. I shook my head; why I refused I do not know. I believe it was mainly out of devilment. There was no doubt that twenty guineas was vastly in excess of the box's value.

Werner took it very well, I thought. He hunched his huge, square shoulders and smiled.

"Anyway," he said, "it sha'n't spoil a pleasant meeting. We'll have another go round."

He rapped on the table and the waiter appeared. It would have been ungracious to deny him in the circumstances, and I accepted the offer of another glass, which I did not need nor want.

The two boxes were side by side upon the table and my eyes went over them. Now I have not been specially equipped by fate for the battle of life, and in a "rough-and-tumble" I don't know that I should have emerged successfully. Happily I have been spared the chances of a struggle for life. But I have always had two primitive qualities, which I once foolishly hoped would lead me far in the diplomatic service. However, they don't need primitive properties there. Mine are a very excellent memory for faces, and — I suppose what that springs from — a very accurate and acute observation. I sum up with my eyes swiftly; I have the trick of keeping the items in my mind; and I can call upon them at will for recognition. So, examining those two boxes with a little more care than I had hitherto displayed, I noted a slight difference between them. It was only a trifling variation in the flight of lacquered birds on the lid, the deviation of a tail, and seemed to me of no significance. When I looked up again, as the waiter brought the bottle, Werner was gazing towards the bar in the distance, and mechanically my eyes followed his. A few people stood about it, and drank, and ate cheese and biscuits, and talked. One of these, who,

however, had no companion for conversation, was a man of forty odd dressed quietly in gray. His face, as he turned sideways from the bar to drink of his glass, came into profile, and I remembered that I had noticed him casually in the auction room.

"Well, here's health and wealth," said Werner, raising his glass.

I echoed the toast, and, as we set down the glasses, Werner said suddenly:

"By the way, Maddock, I never looked up that train. There's a time-table hanging up there. Would you mind getting it?"

Now the time-table hung just beyond me on the wall, and I could easily have reached it. Maddock rose, and bent forward, but I was before him. I turned and unhitched the book from its nail, and handed it to Werner.

"Many thanks," he said, and opened it.

At the bar I could see the man whom I had recognized, now full face towards us, munching a biscuit abstractedly. Werner shut the book.

"Six thirty-five," he said. "That'll do nicely." He drained the glass, and I followed suit, and we both rose.

"Better stick that back in your pocket, Maddock," said he, with an indifferent gesture towards the boxes. Maddock put a hand out to the one near him, but my hand was already upon it.

"This is mine," I said. I had unconsciously registered, you see, that difference in the tail feathering.

"Ours was this side!" declared Maddock rather shortly.

Werner was regarding us thoughtfully.

"Is it?" he inquired.

I opened the box, and showed the ink-stained bottle. The bottle in the other had been clean.

"Well, I should n't have known the difference. To me they're as like as two pins," he said, smiling.

"Sorry, Mr. Poindexter. An unusual name, yours."

He looked meditative, but I seemed to be aware that his tone and mien held some message for his excitable companion.

"Yes," I said. "Good-by; I'm sorry I could n't accommodate you."

"Don't mention it," he said, with a wave of his big, dumpy hand. "It happens every day in life and business."

It was at that I left him, and he sat down again when I moved away. The man who had been drinking at the bar passed through the doorway at the same time as myself, and was swallowed up by the stream of foot passengers which was once more flowing east and west.

I took a taxicab straight to my flat at Brompton Court, for it was growing late. I had correspondence to occupy me, and I was dining out. The lacquered box looked quite handsome on the top of my Chinese cabinet, but I had leisure to wonder why I had been such a fool as to refuse twenty guineas for it. I did not examine it further, but went to my writing-desk, and an hour later I dressed for dinner. I dined at the Savoy in pleasant company, went to a theater later, and got back to Brompton Court just about midnight.

My man, Drayton, is all the servant I have or need in the flat. He is a handy man from the navy and an admirable fellow, quick, intelligent, silent, good at need, with an imperturbable cheerfulness and — not least — a capable cook. I came upon Drayton after I left Persia, when I had been trying my luck in the consular service, and he had remained with me ever since, and would not leave if I could help it. Drayton went to bed as a rule at eleven, and he had gone when I entered. The electric light glowed dimly in the hall, and one tantalum bulb was switched on in the dining-room, where a napkin was neatly set out with a decanter of whisky, a glass, and a plate of caviare sandwiches. This was Drayton's kindly thought of me lest I should be hungry ere I retired. I sat down, mixed myself a drink, and nibbled at the sandwiches while I turned over my letters. A shaded, rosy light suffused the room. I turned my ears to the door and listened. At first I thought it was Drayton, and then I knew it was n't. I had heard the drub of the tradesmen's lift in the area in the distance, but had paid no heed. It was the sound in the passage that arrested me — a very faint sound, but a regular one — pat — pat — pat.

I got up, moved to the door, and opened it wider. The light from the hall illumined the mouth of the passage to the kitchen quarters, and nothing was visible. The heavy Wilton pile masked my footsteps, which repeated that pat — pat — pat. I saw the door of the drawing-room ajar, and pushed it wider. The closed curtains held the room in thick darkness.

I had a notion, and dismissed it as I conceived it, that some one was breathing not far off.

I stepped inside and groped for the switches. As I found them, and clicked the chamber into light, the black figure of a man flew past me, jolting me sharply aside in the process, and sped out and down the corridor to the kitchen. I called out, and at that moment I heard a door open at the end of the passage where Drayton slept.

"Catch thief, Drayton!" I shouted.

There was a noise, a crash. I rushed down the passage and bumped into a human body. The next moment the corridor and the kitchen were alight. Drayton confronted me in pajamas.

"Where is he?" I asked breathlessly.

Drayton ran across the kitchen; the window was open into the gray summer night.

"He's jumped through on to the tree," he said excitedly.

The arms of a huge plane tree from the gardens without protruded right across the kitchen window. The breeze was now rumpling the feathered branches pleasantly, and sighing in the leaves. I dashed out of the flat, which was on the second floor, and went down the stairs two at a time. When I reached the door into the garden I had some difficulty in turning the cumbrous key, but once outside I went at express speed to the base of the plane tree.

"That you, sir? I'm afraid he's gone." Drayton's voice called from above. "I heard a scuffle in the bushes over there."

I sought the bushes, explored them, beat the gar-

dens generally with a lantern and the help of Drayton, who had hastily dressed and followed me. But there was no trace of the fugitive to be found, and I conceived that he had made his escape by scaling one of the iron gates which gave access to the garden from the streets which surrounded the quadrangle of Brompton Court. There was no use in continuing a vain search, and so I returned to my rooms.

Drayton and I made an examination of the flat, and discovered, as I had already had time to conjecture, that the intruder had obtained entrance by hauling himself up from the area on the dumb-waiter, and forcing the scullery window. His object, of course, had been plunder, but after a long scrutiny I could not find anything missing. I had evidently interrupted him early in his work; in fact, with the recollection of the rumbling dumb-waiter in my ears, I came to the conclusion that he had only just made his entrance when I sensed him in the passage. Drayton went back to his bed, but I remained up for an hour. I finished my sandwiches and my whisky, and began to review the day, as one sometimes does. The scene in the auction room and my experience subsequently in the wine bar returned to my memory. I smiled at the oddness of it, and once more asked myself why I had been such an ass as to refuse those twenty guineas. That reminded me to have another look at my purchase. I went into the drawing-room, switched on the light, and turned to the Chinese cabinet. The lacquered box had fallen on its side, and lay askew upon the cabinet. I set

it up, wondering — and then I guessed. The thief must have upset it when I disturbed him. He had gone straight to the cabinet as a likely place for valuables, and had caught up —

Then my mind came to an abrupt pause. For something flashed upon me, an illuminating discovery. The visitor had wanted that box.

CHAPTER II

THE LACQUERED BOX

I WENT to bed and to sleep with that conviction impressed upon me, and it mingled in my dreams. I fled down the deeps of sleep, actually carrying a box which I strove in vain to hide, and I was pursued by invisible and mysterious enemies. I don't know if it was due to the sandwiches, or to the excitement of the nocturnal chase, but the atmosphere of my dreams was maleficent; it frightened me. I awoke to dawn and sense and the normal conditions of life, and, throwing off the dreams and facts alike of the past night without any difficulty, I made a good breakfast. I had a full day before me, but before I went out I gave Drayton instructions for the day, and I remembered the box. I told him to put it away in a safe place, and to inform the estate office regarding the attempted burglary.

When I got back in the evening, I asked if anything of moment had happened, and received Drayton's negative with satisfaction. I mused over my cigar, remembering an engagement I had entered into during the day. I had met Dick Cassilis at lunch, a man whom I had not seen since we were both in

Vienna, and I had invited him down to my river bungalow.

Cassilis was a Harvard man, by profession a lawyer, and by preference a wanderer. He had inherited a small patrimony, like myself, and he had a passion for travel. Still young — he was thirty-two, some four years under my own age — he had not yet succeeded in satiating himself with movement, and he turned up often where one never looked for him. He was at Vienna on one of these pilgrimages when I was attached to the embassy there, and I had taken a huge fancy to him on the spot.

He was a lean, tall, clean-shaven fellow with a fresh color and an admirable smile which gave charm to his face. He had seen a great deal, but he was not a talker — at least he did not talk about himself; and he had a quick, alert mind and an unquenchable spirit. How it was ever supposed that this man would settle down to the drab routine of the law is more than I can conceive. He was an adventurer at heart, and game to back his hazards to the last.

Yet even Dick Cassilis had his equable and lazy moods, and he had joyfully acquiesced in my suggestion that he should spend a week-end on the river. It was midsummer; the heat was growing; and all the conditions of the weather argued in favor of cool, unconventional raiment, of lounges on the lawn, of long, refreshing drinks through straws, of punts and the cool breath of waters, of house-boats bedecked with Chinese lanterns; in fine, of a world at ease and peace.

Cassilis and I left London next day after lunch at the club, Drayton having gone down earlier to make preparations. My bungalow was a small affair, but its setting was picturesque. The shaven lawn went down to the river's edge, from which my boat swung and dangled in the flowing tide. There was a little color in the garden, and the place was bright with flowers. It was enchanting after the muffled roar and dust and heat of town.

Cassilis flung himself down in the deck chair on the lawn, and closed his eyes.

“ ‘ In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon.’ ”

he quoted languorously. He had a passion for the “Lotos Eaters,” which was unintelligible in a man of such a strenuous activity. “ ‘ There is sweet music here that softer falls,’ Poindexter,” he proceeded solemnly.

“ ‘ Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night-dews on still waters,’ —

which reminds me.” He broke off, got up hastily, and walked down toward the water's edge. “ There is quite a pretty tide running. Let's pull off to the church spire I see in the distance and explore the land. How I love English villages! And the Thames is in a class by itself.”

We pulled up to the mark he had indicated, and even some distance beyond it. Cassilis insisted on wandering about the village, and poking his nose into the shops. He bought tobacco in one, and a stick in another, and a pound of butter in a third.

"What on earth do you want with those things?" I asked. "It's not the tobacco you smoke; you probably have already more sticks than you know what to do with; and I have no doubt Drayton has purchased all the butter he requires."

"True," he said whimsically, "but I like buying things, and I love shops. After all, the butter will do to sit on."

He was in a hopelessly frivolous holiday mood, which always made him a charming companion. Indeed, we both enjoyed ourselves to the full during the next two days, idling, talking, sculling, smoking, and reading.

We were at lunch on the second day and were talking of future plans. Cassilis wanted me to join him in an expedition — somewhere, and was for tossing up to see where it should be. I was half inclined to assent, having no particular ties that bound me to England after the close of the season, and was turning over possible routes, after rejecting the spin of the coin.

"Japan — Venezuela — Siberia — Sahara," suggested Cassilis, imperturbably foolish.

"I should n't mind Norway —" I was beginning, when my eyes fell upon something which stood on the mantelpiece, and which I had not noticed before. It was the lacquered box which I had bought at the auction.

"Drayton, what's that doing here?" I inquired. Drayton was fluent in explanation. I always suspected that by nature he was really loquacious, but an admirable discipline restrained him.

"Beg pardon, sir, I brought it," said he. "I thought you set store by it, sir, as you gave it to me to put away; so I brought it with the other things."

"What is it?" asked Cassilis, staring at the box.

I went on with my lunch, and I told him the story of the auction room. He got up, took the box in his hand, opened it, and scrutinized it.

"Yes, it's a toilet box," he said, "about a hundred years old. I've seen a good many in Japan. You refused twenty guineas, did you? My dear boy, it may have been bluff; it was n't business. I could purchase these for fifty dollars any day."

"Then why the deuce did they offer twenty guineas for it?" I asked, a little annoyed, partly at my own folly and partly at his reflection on it.

"That was n't business, either," he said, looking up with a smile, and his face took on a more thoughtful expression then, "unless —" he never finished his sentence, but came back to the table. "How sweet the sunlight sleeps upon the river! I vote for a punt and a backwater this afternoon."

That was, in fact, how we spent the afternoon, with pipes and books and a fishing-rod. Cassilis caught two small chub and nearly fell into the stream in his excitement.

"I really caught three, but the other was too little to know how to hold on, poor thing," he explained, after a famous original.

We went to bed thoroughly contented, and thoroughly lazy. Unfortunately, however, I at least was not thoroughly sleepy. Indeed, after retiring to my

room, which was next to the dining-room, I sat up smoking a cigarette and looking out in the garden. In those culminating days of midsummer there is no real darkness; night is a luminous gloom. There were stars overhead, and there was a mist of light veiling the lawns and shrubberies. The river was like an open road, in which night and day met, and out of which one might expect the dawn at any moment. I sat thinking for some time, and then I was moved by an impulse from nowhere. I got up, and went down the corridor to the garden door, opened it, and passed out. At the foot of the lawn, the dinghy rocked in the flow of the current. I jumped in, cast it loose, and rowed into the gloaming.

I pulled upstream for a mile or so, enjoying the silence and the mystery of night. Shadows rose upon the river bank, which I took to be trees, and the water lapped under the dinghy with each propulsion of the oars. I let myself drift. Far off I could catch the continuous monotone of a weir, drumming in the night. I drifted into the bank, pushed myself off, and went down lazily, just keeping the boat's nose straight; and, after an absence of an hour or so, I bumped into the lawns below the bungalow.

I got out, tied up the boat, and was turning to move away when I was astonished to see another dinghy made fast to the boat-house. It was not likely that any one had called at such an hour, for it was past midnight; and it would be strange if a belated wayfarer had mistaken his landing stage. I

walked up to the house, wondering, and slipped my key into the lock. Inside was darkness and silence. I listened, but could hear no sound.

Drayton slept at the back of the bungalow, and Cassilis had been put up next to the smoking-room. I had paused on entering, and now I moved on again, four, five paces, and I paused again suddenly outside the dining-room door. In that instant of pause I heard a faint click, and I interpreted it. An inspiration, for it had no time to be a definite thought, sent me swiftly back to the door and out into the garden. The click was the sound of a window rising. I ran round the dining-room just as a dark figure disentangled itself from the shadows of the house. Immediately I grappled with it.

My opponent was lithe and active, and I at once saw that I had met my match. We swayed and staggered and fell into the bushes, and I realized with a sickening sense of defeat that I was being rolled under. The darkness was not so deep even there beneath the laurels, but that I could discern the movements of the man who was struggling above me. I saw his arm raised and it seemed monstrous, menacing. It held something.

Then it suddenly dropped, and I felt the tension of the grip in which I lay relax. From the side on which the night spread like a luminous shroud, I perceived a hand and a black shadow in it.

“All right!” The marauder’s voice came to me strange and clear. “I’m done.”

I disentangled myself and made out the position. Cassilis stood, sharp and watchful, in his pajamas,

with the revolver still within a foot of the man's head. I got up painfully.

"A squeak!" I said. "Thanks, Dick. What was he using?"

The man rose also. "Only a billet of wood," he said. "It would have knocked the stuffing out of you for half an hour — no permanent harm."

"Thanks!" I said dryly. "Well, if you've no objection we'll go in."

He made no remonstrance, nor did he attempt to stir from within the range of Cassilis's weapon. He entered the house, and I turned on the light. The man had sunk into a chair, and taken a cigarette case from his pocket.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he inquired.

I nodded. Cassilis had his eyes upon the man as firmly as his revolver. Our prisoner was about forty years of age, I judged, of a fine, well-turned physique, had a head gracefully set, and regular features, tanned, but marked with the wear and tear of life and its indiscretions. He wore a short, trimmed and pointed beard, and he had bright, roving eyes. He lit a cigarette with a steady hand, and blew out the match.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm not really a burglar. You'll find all your valuables safe."

At that moment the door opened, and Drayton appeared, half dressed. He had something in his hand.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "I found this outside under the laurels."

I recognized it at once. It was the lacquered box!

And as suddenly I made another recognition. I remembered that I had seen this man before. He was the man I had casually noticed in the auction room and at the bar of the wine-shop. His eyes had followed ours to what Drayton held, and I saw his white teeth emerge in a smile from under his moustache.

"Thank you, Drayton," I said; "you heard the row, then?"

"Yes, sir, I was waiting behind Mr. Cassilis, sir, — with this, sir."

He cheerfully exhibited a terrible cutlass, and once more I was conscious of the stranger's smile.

"Good man!" I said. "We shall want you to go for the police shortly, Drayton; so be within reach."

"Yes, sir." The cheerful face retired and the door closed.

"You will send for the police?" asked the stranger.

"Certainly," I responded. "What else do you expect? As for your not being a burglar, I dare say you're not an ordinary burglar, but I can't subscribe to your statement that all my valuables are safe."

"You mean that box?" he asked, with an inclination of his head towards the table on which it had been placed. "How much do you think it is worth?"

"I refused twenty guineas for it," I said.

He appeared to ponder. "Twenty guineas," he repeated, and his eyes moved over my face as if he were estimating me or something in me.

"It was a cheap offer," he said at last, and added meditatively, "I wonder if we could strike a bargain. It would be worth my while, and, I think yours." He looked up suddenly with that swift glance of his. "Tell me what you propose to do exactly? You will proceed against me for breaking into your house?"

"Yes," I said, "the usual phrasing — attempted burglary."

"That means, with your evidence, anything from six months to two years," he said coolly, and blew the smoke through his nostrils. "Suppose it would be possible to strike a bargain?"

"The bargain," said Cassilis, speaking at last, "would be dictated by us on our own terms. You see," he added pleasantly, as the other made no answer, "we have the whip hand — all the trumps."

"Oh, no," he shook his head with his smile. "But I confess you have a certain position of advantage. If you intend to press it, I must yield so far."

"We press it," said Cassilis. "Don't we, Jack? Try one of my cigarettes."

He offered his case to the stranger, who accepted it with a polite acknowledgment.

"Next to getting the best of a deal," he said easily, "I like a square deal, so that we know where we stand. Very well, I'll tell you a story. Do you mind a story at this time in the morning?"

"Nothing in the world I should like better," said Cassilis, lighting his cigarette. He still held his revolver in his other hand. "Jack, do you think we might have a whisky and soda with it?"

I rose. "Since we are all so sociable, why, yes," I said dryly. I set out the decanter and filled the glasses. The stranger half emptied his at a draught.

"I think I wanted that," he said. "Mr. Poin-dexter has strong hands." He made a smiling gesture towards his throat, on which a red mark was visible, and lolled back in his chair. "Well, my name's Houston, and circumstances have placed me in an awkward position. Call it bad luck — fate. It does n't matter. It's the thing itself that signifies. I came within call of a fortune once — twice, and lost it. This makes the third time, unless —" he looked from one to the other of us, "unless I can persuade you to make terms. Look here, gentlemen, I'm showing my hand," he said earnestly, "and you must take that into consideration. I could shut my mouth and go to prison, and be no worse than that. But I prefer a deal. It will suit my book if it comes off, and, I think, suit yours."

"Suppose we hear it," I said, still dryly.

"Precisely nine months back I was in Peru. Ever heard of the Big Fish?" asked Houston suddenly. "No, I don't suppose you ever did. Anyway, it means something. I daresay you're acquainted with the history of the Incas and of their subjection by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. Every schoolboy knows of it, and I knew about as much as every schoolboy when I went to Peru. I went out on business, — a mining proposition. Well, I need n't go into that. There was a party of us out for a matter of some months, and we did n't strike very much, though I believe there's riches be-

yond the dreams of avarice in that Andine district. Anyway, Raymond and I, who were running the show, came out of it pretty badly. It cost us a good many thousand dollars. That's Raymond's box you've got," he said, breaking off abruptly and pointing at the table, on which reposed also Cassilis's hand with the loaded revolver.

"I had n't heard of the Big Fish any more than you till I'd been in Peru for some time. Then I ran across the story. You see, when the Incas were driven from their last stronghold across those terrible plateaus, they carried along with them all their possessions, including the royal treasure which had accumulated for centuries and is reputed to be of untold value. They were pursued by the Spaniards, who had wind of this, and, finding themselves pressed, they buried part of the treasure in the mountains. This lightened them some, I suppose, for they managed to make good their retreat for a further distance, and then, on the approach of their ruthless enemy, lost heart, and made a cache of the remaining treasure. A little later they were broken in pieces by the Spanish, and scattered to the winds."

Houston paused and sipped his whisky. I saw that Cassilis's eyes were fixed intently on the speaker.

"There the treasure lay undiscovered for more than a hundred years, although tradition got hold of the story. The Spaniards, themselves, hunted for it in vain, and the heirs and assigns after them, so to speak. But somewhere in the eighteenth century a party of searchers stumbled on a cache, and set themselves up for millionaires. They paid, I believe,

something like a million pounds sterling to the Spanish government by way of royalty or commission. You can judge from that the size of the cache." Again Houston paused, and again he sipped his whisky. "It was the smaller cache, known as the Little Fish, which was found," he said, after a moment. "The Big Fish still remains undiscovered."

"Go on," said Cassilis feverishly.

Houston showed his teeth in a smile, and lit a cigarette.

"It interests you?" he asked. "Perhaps I ought to stop right now and make a treaty. But I guess I won't. I'll shovel all the cards on the table. Raymond and I, with our outfit, had our fill of prospecting. We were as lean as herrings and we had lost most of the mules. I tell you it's rough up there. We were at a big height most of the time, and the air was rarefied. There's mountain sickness worse than seasickness. It makes you feel your stomach's the only thing you've got, and you wish it belonged to some one else. I thought I'd never stop — well, anyway, it was bad. The place was a wilderness of rock with some grass and scanty cactus. If ever I drew hell, I'd draw it with a foreground like that. And, at the back, why — well, I'll come to that. This was on the ranges by — oh, well, you would n't know. Maybe you will a bit later.

"That was just about the time old Raymond chose to spring his surprise on me. Raymond he called himself, but his name was Ramon right enough, and he came from 'Frisco way. He was rather stuck on his family, and was a sort of Hidalgo breed. But he

found Raymond suited him better for keeps, so he had it pasted on him. He was a little, wiry, active fellow, with a capacity for enthusiasm that kept you wondering what next. But I confess I never expected that ebullition.

“He had made a study of the Spanish-American states, starting with his own, and he had done a good deal of Mexico, and came easily down in that way to Peru. It was Peru that held him. It was a sort of land of promise to him, which was one reason why he and I were out on the Andes on that fool quest. But Raymond was n’t daunted, as you’ll see.

“One night he came to me just as I was thinking of the slopes below and a sort of civilization, and he opened fire. Were we to go back busted? he asked. After all our trouble, were we going to confess ourselves failures? That did n’t appeal much to me, not having any pride or self-conceit to worry me just then. What I wanted was square meals and gaslights and things of that sort. Then he sprung his mine. I told you he’d made a study of those countries, and had dug and delved in books. That was how he struck the trail of the Big Fish. All that rumor had to say en route, he’d picked up, pigeonholed and docketed; and now that one quest was over, he had taken fire on the other. What he asked me was to join him in a search for the treasure.

“You’ll think I was a fool to listen, but he’d got his facts ledgered up. He had made out the district in which the cache must have been made, and he had kept eyes and ears open. A word he’d heard — a

name — from one of the mestizos we had with us gave him his clue, and now he thought he could lay his hands on it. He talked to convince me, and tired and sick as I was, I sat up and mingled my enthusiasm. It was arranged that we should quit the camp with one or two Indians and mules, travel lightly, and make a shot for the venture. He did n't want the whole camp in it, for he did n't trust them."

Houston's eyes, which had been fixed meditatively on the top of his cigarette, moved from my face to Cassilis. He spoke slowly. Cassilis nodded, as if to show that he understood.

"Well, to cut the tale short," said Houston, resuming more briskly, "we quitted — left the others to go down to the coast as they liked, and went off at a tangent, talking of opal mines. Then we got a taste of that hell of which we'd just seen the foreground.

"We started with three Indians and five mules, and a snowstorm killed two of the latter the second night out. We were at a mighty height then, in a pass which gave access to the eastern range. It snowed for four and twenty hours, and we huddled together against the rocks, eating of the depleted stores, and talking till our spirits failed, sleeping when we might, and dreaming. It was n't treasure I dreamed of. When we got out and on to the trail again, we were obliged to go slower, by reason of the two dead mules. I had a fierce attack of the sickness, and Raymond, too. But we pushed on, and at last came to a big dry cañon; I don't know the history of it, but I guessed it was a relic of the past. It

had been dug out by glacial action; a river had once run down it between rocks a thousand feet high. It was cragged and scarped like those bare places you see in illustrations to 'Paradise Lost.' There was nothing but rock, rock, rock. And into this we descended!

"That, I guess, was all the hell I'm going to have. I don't like to look back on it too closely. The first Indian died that night — of what we did n't know. He just sickened and died in an hour or so. The following day the second died in the same mysterious way. By that time we had got alarmed. I was sick all the way — the air seemed too light to breathe. And big, jagged rocks shut out the sun from us; we walked in a dreary twilight, staggering and foundering on the rocky bed. The third mule collapsed that night. I confess I began to get frightened. It looked as if we were going to lay our bones there to bleach in the gloom of the cañon. But nothing would keep Raymond back, — nothing that is, until he fell ill, and even that did n't, as you'll see. The third Indian died in the course of the next day, and toward night Raymond sickened. He had temperature and wandered, and I sat up all night with him in the tent I had managed to pitch. I reckoned then that we had been marked down, and might as well give up. There was food of a sort left, but we were both sick men, and one was delirious, and were on a God-forgotten wilderness, hundreds of miles from any human trail.

"Raymond was better in the morning, and talked about pushing on. It was fool's talk, but he talked.

By this time I had n't much faith left in the quest. It had been screwed out of me on the rack. But Raymond was alive with belief still. You see, he had made up his mind that the Big Fish was buried in the hecatombs of the Chima, and that was where he was making for. But that lost city of the Chima, who were dead before the Incas ruled, eluded him. It was reports of the natives he was going by, and there is n't much as a rule in tradition, I've found. A few days' rest made some improvement in Raymond, and he insisted on descending the cañon further. Then there came something which I thought would put a finish to his zeal. The cañon divided, and he could n't tell which hand to take.

"It ended in our deciding to split up. We each took a mule, shook hands, gave each other our blessings, and then he descended one ravine and I the other. I never saw him again."

Houston paused, and we waited.

"He died three weeks since in London. That's his box. He found what he was after, and I did n't. But he died before he could realize. The secret of it's there — on that table."

CHAPTER III

WE STRIKE A BARGAIN

HOUSTON'S voice showed no signs of excitement; he spoke quietly and unemotionally, and he merely pointed with a finger at the table, on which still rested Cassilis's hand holding the revolver. It was Cassilis who broke the short silence.

"What is there?" he asked.

"The secret of the Big Fish," said the man. "That was why I wanted it. You see, it was not exactly what is meant by burglary."

"How do you know it's there?" asked Cassilis sharply. Houston lit another cigarette.

"Raymond wrote me that he kept it there," he said. "I said I never saw him again, nor did I. I arrived in England too late; but I heard from him. It was two months later when I got back to the coast, carried most of the way in a litter. My food gave out; I lost my way; and I was delirious when I was picked up by a prospecting party on a trail for Bolivia. When I was able to attend to things I made inquiries, expecting to hear no more of Raymond; but I found that he, too, had escaped and come back. He had passed through Lima, and had set sail for New York.

"After a bit I mustered strength and I wrote to him at an address of his in San Francisco. A month or so later, I had a letter from him from New York, giving an account of his journey, and announcing his success. He was always straight, was Raymond. He might have kept it to himself, but he told me how he had found the cache, and said that he was going to London to make preparations for an expedition to recover the treasure. That was how I came to learn where he kept the secret plan. He wrote, asking me to join him in London. But I had a relapse, and — I arrived too late."

There was a moment's silence. I remembered the attempts to purchase the box from me in the auction room and in the wine-bar: I remembered the thief in the night. Lo, here was another. Was this the whole explanation? Had we everything before us? Yet it was not on that point that I spoke, when I broke silence. None of us had as yet offered to trust the box.

"Have you got that letter?" I asked abruptly.

Houston showed his teeth whitely. "No, I have n't; I lost it. Of course that is what you expected me to say. Well, I've said it." He shrugged his shoulders. "If I had it, I don't know that I need be here just now. In a sort of way it would have disclosed a contract. Anyway, it would have proved my bona fides with the executors."

"With the executors!" I exclaimed.

"Yes; of course I approached them," he said, in his mellifluous, easy voice. "I found Raymond dead, and I went at once to the executors. They had n't

much to straighten out here. Raymond's property is in the States, mainly. Well, they would n't listen to me or hear of my claim. I was n't fool enough to give away the show, but they refused the thing as I put it — wanted proof, don't you know. And I had none. I got no information out of them, but I guessed there 'd be a sale; and so I managed to get on the track of it. It was difficult, but I succeeded — too late again." He paused, threw the end of his cigarette into the fireplace, and smiled again. "That's why I am a criminal."

I was thinking of the square man, Werner, and of his lanky companion. There was no mention of any such people in Houston's talk.

"And your friends?" I said caustically.

"Friends?" He looked a question at me.

"Those who are with you in this venture — your associates," I explained.

He made a gesture which had some grace in it.

"There is no one," he said. "I am alone. It was Raymond and myself."

Again I was silent, pondering, and it was Cassilis who took up the cross-examination.

"May we ask how you came to discover that Mr. Poindexter had the box?" he asked saucily.

"Yes, you've a right to do that," assented Houston, nodding, "but I don't want to answer quite all. It would or might get some one into trouble," he explained pleasantly. "You see, money talks, and your name is peculiar, Mr. Poindexter. Frankly, I believe had it been Smith or something cognate, the box and its secret would have disap-

peared into the void as far as I was concerned. But Poindexter marked it down. There was a bit of difficulty, but not much. I traced you to Brompton Court."

"But I had left," I said, putting in sharply for a purpose.

"Yes," he replied leisurely, "and that made a bit of detective work for me. It was unexpected. You see, it was annoying to have been a day behind the fair always — in regard to Raymond, the sale and then you. But I fixed it."

"Do tell us," said Cassilis, in a friendly way.

"Well, I found out at once from the porter that you had only been gone a day. Of course he would n't give me the address. Nor was it practicable to pick it up in any directory I could lay my hands on. After all, you might have gone anywhere, but would you have taken the box with you?"

He paused.

"You found out that?" I interrupted quickly.

"I'm sorry. I beg your pardon. I offer you any satisfaction you may wish to take, when you have heard me through." He smiled, with a graceful wave of his hand. "It was necessary, you see, in my game. Well, this can't be very interesting to you. I'll wind up. The easiest way to track you was through the tradesmen. The first time I drew blank, and was stared at. It was a first-class shop at which I was dead sure you traded. Then I tried a grocer with a post-office business in one corner. I argued you'd be known there for a certainty; and so you were. But I didn't win out. I inquired if your

book had been forwarded, and said you were anxious to settle up. The polite manager bowed and smiled and said he was obliged to me, and — where was it to be forwarded? That got me. He did n't know, and so I told him he'd better send it to the flat, and the postal authorities would send it on. I made another failure at a newspaper shop, and then I did some thinking."

He broke off. "Do you think I might replenish this glass? I seem to have been talking a heap. Many thanks. Oh, it turned out to be pretty easy," he said, sitting back in his chair. "I went to the district post-office, where the letters would be re-directed to you, and found an innocent looking female clerk. I said I'd come about Mr. Poin-dexter's letters, and that there was one two shillings was due on. I pushed a florin across the counter. The girl was puzzled, could n't understand, and sought explanations. I repeated myself with confusing additions, making a rigmarole of a parcel which had not been stamped. I wanted to pay. The girl saw a genuine case of remorse, still could n't fathom it, and sought assistance. This was in the shape of a man to whom I repeated my involved story. I worked myself up into a polite fluster. I demanded to pay on the parcel, and with some excitement I posed as a dull and honest foreigner. By and by there were three of them, and they put their heads together, and began to turn up papers. Finally, one brought up a couple of letters and a bulky envelope.

"'There's no parcel here addressed to Mr. Poin-dexter,' said he.

"I indicated the bulky envelope with some excitement and he turned it to me. I read the address on it. I shook my head, smiled, bowed, pocketed the florin, and withdrew. It took some time, but it was easy."

His composure, his assurance, was astounding.

"It 's as easy as breaking in," I suggested.

"No," he replied, after pondering. "That was too easy."

"Having then marked me down," I continued, "you managed the burglary."

"It is odd," said Houston, "but if you will believe me, the burglary was an afterthought, a temptation. I had the idea of coming to you first with my story, as I do now perforce. But I was too greedy. I thought it over. The temptation was too great, and when I saw the window fastenings —"

He laughed. "Anyway, there 's the story, and now it 's up to you, gentlemen."

He drank some of his whisky, and surveyed us indifferently and with neutral eyes. Cassilis rose. We had behaved with exemplary patience up till then, but we had proved too much for him.

"Don't you think it 's time we had a look at the box?" he asked.

I nodded, and he handed it over to me. Suddenly Houston's eyes, which had been wandering, steadied hard upon me. Cassilis toyed with the revolver. I opened the lacquered lid, and disclosed the glass and the tray; the bottle was removable and gave access to a recess beneath, which was empty. That

seemed to be the extent of the box, and Cassilis and I gazed at it with disappointment. I looked up at Houston.

"Pardon me," he said, and inserted a long, elegant hand into the interior. There was a click, and a small panel gave way, discovering a long, narrow compartment in the base of the box. In this was a strip of paper folded lengthwise. Houston's fingers were withdrawn without touching this, but I noticed that they were tremulous. I pulled out the paper, set down the box, and straightened out the paper, smoothed it, and held it to the light. Houston was not looking at me, but at the paper, and his eyes seemed to mark out a lane of light to my hands. It was a mere halfsheet of notepaper, and on it was scrawled in a spidery hand:

For the secret of the Big Fish, inquire at sanctuary of San Felipe, Astarnok.

I read this out, and glanced up. Houston's face had changed. It had been pallid a moment before, and now it was normal; his nostrils were working fast, but it was evident that he had emerged from a strain. I have told you that I have a mind which notes and pigeon-holes trifles. It was evident to me in that instant that Houston had had a disappointment; he had not heard what he had expected to hear. He had all the appearance of one deeply wrapped in thought and involved in its swift revolutions. Almost it seemed as if he were at the moment unaware of our presence. Then he breathed deeply and laughed. I believed then, and I believe

now, that in those few minutes he had come to a decision. But I didn't know what it was.

"Where is Astarnok?" asked Cassilis.

"It's a village in the back of beyond; it lies in the Sierras of Peru," said Houston.

"Well," said I. "This has been very interesting as an interlude, but it may be all a pleasant game of buncombe."

Cassilis jumped at me: "For which Mr. Houston risked jail," he said.

Houston was watching us smilingly. "I await your decision, gentlemen," he said.

Cassilis threw down the revolver. "That's mine," he said, and looked at me, his handsome face aglow. "I think, Jack," he said, "that our holiday's settled."

"I wonder," I said, and to that added: "Yes, I believe it is." I turned to the wondering Houston. "What you have said is all very interesting, and I can add something to it. There were two boxes. Did you know that?"

"Two!" His eyes, alert, were fixed upon me in that narrowed gaze.

"Yes; two boxes of identical appearance were offered at the sale. One passed into other hands."

"Raymond must have duplicated it as a safeguard," said he thoughtfully.

"The purchasers of the first box, who missed the second, were very anxious to get it from me," I went on quietly.

"Ah!" I thought I had in my turn interested him. "In fact," I continued, "there was a burglary

before yours. This box has a value in other eyes also." He frowned, his brows knit.

"Ah! I had a suspicion. You know that letter. I can't produce it. It was lost. Well, I have often thought it was stolen. I can't understand —" He paused. "That would account for some things. So some one was after the box. It complicates matters a bit. I lost that letter on board ship. I had a suspicion —"

"Well, any one is welcome to the box, now," said Cassilis, cheerfully.

"Thanks," said I dryly. "And now, Mr. Houston, may I ask what you propose?"

"I want a clean slate," he said, smiling, "and a joint expedition in which we all share alike. Frankly, I tell you my share of Raymond's find was to have been a third. If you come in, let it remain a third. You merely step into Raymond's shoes."

"There is his estate," I suggested.

"I am no lawyer," he replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But it seems we have at present nothing to divide, nothing the law can take into account."

There was some reason in that argument. Cassilis nodded.

"We can't quarrel over what we don't know to exist," he said. There was silence for a few minutes, and then I spoke.

"Yes, I agree," I said.

Houston rose. "Then I guess I'll quit, ere you change your mind," he said.

We showed him out, after making an appointment for the following day. The dawn was pale in the

east when we heard the dip of his oars in the water.

Cassilis turned to me. "You believe?" he asked.

"A good deal of it," I answered. "It's a sporting chance."

"I would n't miss it for worlds," he said eagerly. "I've had no such surprise since the fakir and I went into Thibet together. He can't bolt, I suppose?"

"He can't get away without a ship, and no liner goes out before Thursday."

"We'll go on Thursday," said Cassilis. "You go to bed. I'll see the dawn in."

I was tired, although I was excited, and I went to bed. I slept soundly, but I awoke once to hear Cassilis retiring, and I thought he paused outside my door, and then passed on. It appeared to me as if he had been coming in to wake me, and had changed his mind.

I think with the morning came doubts to both of us. Cassilis was restless, but argued in favor of what, I felt assured, he only half believed in. Together we studied the scrap of paper, as if a deeper scrutiny of it would shed a light upon the situation. To me, in the bright light of the summer day, with garish realities about one, there seemed something preposterous about this episode through which we had gone, and the story to which we had listened.

"You think we've been sold, Jack?" asked Cassilis, suddenly giving in.

"Don't you?" I inquired.

He made a whimsical face. "I'd like hugely to

believe, but I'm not sure we shall see Mr. Houston again. Yes, I am," he added suddenly.

He was right. Houston called after dinner at the hour he had appointed, and, with his appearance, once more the narrative resumed its reality, and the spell of the venture invested us. Houston was very matter-of-fact.

"If we are going, we'd better get off at once," he said. "Is n't there an old Latin proverb to that effect? There's a direct boat on Thursday. If we went by way of Panama, it would probably take us longer. By your leave, gentlemen, we will make it Thursday."

I thought there was some anxiety in his tone, but I did n't know. Cassilis, an eager and an experienced traveler, would have agreed to start that day; and I could make my preparations by Thursday. We agreed, and we sat for a long time discussing our plans.

It was an odd situation, when you come to think of it, that we should be hobnobbing over cigars and glasses with our burglar. I think we both watched and studied him very closely, and he made a good impression on us. He was an educated man in a way, an adventurer, of course, and a happy-go-lucky one, but a man who was accustomed to risks, and to take chances, had seen a good deal of the world, and was capable of bold, even of unscrupulous, action, if necessary, as indeed the circumstances of his introduction to ourselves demonstrated. He professed simply to have made a business proposition to us, and he conducted himself on that foot-

ing, pleasantly companionable, advisory, suggestive, but never thrusting himself into a false intimacy, or assuming the appearance of it. He told stories with a certain feeling for words and effects, and gave us impressionistic sketches of the Andine Sierras.

"I hate 'em," he said calmly. "I simply loathe the idea of going back. But the prize is too big. It means —" He sighed. "My God, I don't know exactly what it does mean."

"And the portorage?" asked Cassilis.

"The Indians of those parts are simple, faithful people. They earn their wages, and know nothing, and want to know nothing, outside their living and their religion. I doubt if they know the color of gold."

"Good!" said I. "That simplifies matters."

Houston looked at me out of the corners of his eyes. "It will be more complex than you think," he said. I liked him for that.

"We are prepared for any complexity in this world," said Cassilis airily. "That's what we're in it for. You're not hooking on to a couple of mercenaries. We're in it for fun."

"And lucre," I added dryly.

"Primarily fun, incidentally lucre," amended Cassilis, with a light laugh. "I've got my marching orders. Jack, if you'll entrust the job to us, Mr. Houston and I will fix all up for Thursday."

"Go your way," said I, smiling. "You will drag me to perdition some day. I have n't forgotten how I escaped by the skin of my teeth from that gambling hell in Constantinople."

"Did you?" he mused. "I had almost forgotten. Who was it ran that troop of bashi-bazouks? Schneider, Schuyler—I forget. Anyway, it was fun."

"Fun! It was madness," I said. "Thank Heaven, I'm older and wiser now."

"If you are counting on that, Jack, you are leaning on a broken reed," said Cassilis, with a warning finger. "See how the old spirit bubbles up! Lord, man, you can hardly keep your seat. What say you, Mr. Houston?"

Houston had been watching us with interest, his eyes alight, and now he smiled without replying. I rose.

"True," I said. "Drayton has forgotten the glasses." I rang the bell, and gave my orders, and we settled down for a talk over the arrangements for departure. Houston was to go back to London the next morning, and was to be joined by Cassilis later in the day. I had some affairs that would engage my attention, and I decided to follow him. We made the dispositions, all three of us, like old campaigners.

Houston rose as the clock struck eleven. It was time, he said, that he should be going.

"I'll go down with you to the boat," I said, to learn that his boat was not there.

"I came by the bridge and walked by the field paths," he said carelessly. "I fancied the stroll."

"Ah!" replied Cassilis, poking his head out of the window. "Your summer nights—when you have a summer," he added ungraciously.

He drank in the soft breath of the garden. Houston made his good-bys and went out into the corridor, where his hat and coat had been left. It was a slouch hat, and the coat was disfiguringly ample, both incongruous on so smart a man. They would better have become an Italian anarchist, or at all events a Chelsea artist. I bade him farewell, and Drayton showed him to the door. When I got back, Cassilis was still leaning out of the window. "That man's interesting, Jack," he said. "He fascinates me. I wonder —"

"Well?" I asked, encouragingly.

"Nothing; at least not yet. I shall be interested to see more of him in town."

"I don't see how he's going to make anything, if his story's not true," I said.

"Oh, as for that, I don't care if it's true or not," he replied nonchalantly. "Yes, I'd like it to come out true. I think it will in parts, like that egg, you know. But the play's the thing; I mean, of course, the game. It's the prettiest game I was ever a party to. What's that?"

He was staring across the lawn into the shrubbery by a pathway. I joined him. I saw a figure —

I slipped out of the window quickly and stepped into the night. It was the usual shrubbery of laurel and lilac, and in the shadows lurked a man. He eluded me, but next moment I heard Cassilis.

"Good Lord! You!"

There was a murmur after that, and I hastily broke through.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's Houston!"

"Hush!" said a low voice. "I'll tell you in a moment. I tripped and fell — my wind —"

"Come back into the house," I said.

"No; excuse me," he answered. "I'm all right. I'll get on. Only I thought I saw some figures in the drive there."

"What!" I ran towards the house, and entered by the open door.

"Drayton!" I called. The lights were burning in the smoking-room as we had left them, and there was a light also in the kitchen quarters.

Drayton came out into the passage. "Any one about?" I asked.

"No, sir," said he, astonished. "I've heard nothing."

"Bring a light," I ordered, and we went the length of the corridor into the dining-room. The window was open, as it had been open once before, and the Sheffield épergne on the sideboard was disarranged. Something made me glance at once at the bureau. The lacquered box was gone!

I ran out. "Cassili's!" I called, and a voice from the shrubbery answered me. "What the devil —"

He came with his arm through Houston's. "Something up?" he inquired, and I saw that the man he held was a prisoner.

"Bring him in," I said, and we entered. Houston stood with his back to the wall, and he was gray of face and looked frightened.

"Did you find any one?" he asked, ignoring all

that he must have known was in the atmosphere between us.

"No," said I curtly. "But the box is gone."

"By God, I had a suspicion of it!" he broke out, and his face cleared. "It was those figures — two of them. They looked suspicious. Anyway, we've got the paper. They're welcome to it."

"Who are they?" I asked, not knowing what to believe.

"Ah!" he said, now wholly himself again. "I could give you the names I knew them under on board ship, but I don't think they answer to them now. Sharps; mere crooks. I fancy they were known to the ship authorities. It is they who got that letter, as I conjectured. That's what it all means. Gentlemen, this means instant action."

We were all silent for a moment, and Cassilis, who had released his prisoner, fingered his moustache. "I guess it means hurry, if that's so," he remarked.

"We shall have to hear more of these crooks," I said judicially.

"I'll tell you all I know to-morrow night," said Houston airily. "Now I'd rather get away. I don't suppose you mind the loss of the box, but I wish you'd caught them."

"If you had given warning a few moments earlier, we should have," I said caustically.

"Pardon me," he said gracefully. "I had a nasty blow in the pit of the stomach — a tree stump."

Yet when he left and ere I went to bed, I wanted

to understand why he was so badly shaken. It could n't have been the stumble; nor, if I knew anything of men on sight, could he have been scared by the mere presence of two suspicious strangers in the drive.

CHAPTER IV

THE BEGINNING OF THE TRAIL

THERE were nearly three days between the events of that night and our embarkation at Southampton. The *Albuquerque* sailed at two of the afternoon, with Cassilis and myself hanging over the bulwarks of the upper deck, and watching. We had by then a special reason for watching. Houston was in his cabin, a sick man.

The two working days in London passed busily enough. Houston had rooms in Clapham, but I didn't know that till later, as you will see. The address we had was at an hotel in Bloomsbury. It was, of course, necessary that we should remain in touch, since we had interests in common, but Houston seemed to avoid us. I wondered what game he was playing, and particularly if he were playing straight. Cassilis offered no speculations on the subject, but made his preparations like a master of travel, which he was. Houston, as a matter of fact, met us once at certain stores where we were purchasing outfits, and he called at my flat in the evening of the day I got to town. The same night he called on Cassilis at the Savoy. Under all his studied insouciance, I thought I observed a certain

feverishness, a restlessness. He seemed eager to be off, and rather impatient of the necessary delay.

"Perhaps it would have been better to go by a Holt boat from Liverpool —" he began, frowned, and broke off, "But the *Albuquerque* will land us earlier. Anyway — well, see here, Mr. Poindexter, it's just possible that I may be late for the boat train. Don't wait for me. Go ahead. I'll be aboard before she starts."

It seemed an unnecessary piece of information, being at least premature, and it savored of the mysterious. Cassilis pondered when I told him.

"Yes," he assented. "It's all that. Anyhow, I like it. We're not going off like any two ordinary tourists. By gad, we've got an atmosphere about us, Jack."

His charming smile spread over his bronzed face. That was the spirit in which to take it, of course. I really was n't objecting to it myself. However, that brings me to my point. It was Thursday night, and we were to start on the following day. Cassilis and I had a little farewell dinner at the Savoy, at which we speculated about our adventure.

"It's folly, you know," said I, "but it's interesting."

"It's life," said Cassilis, laughing as he drank his wine.

"In my heart of hearts, I don't believe in it," I said.

"I believe in him," said Cassilis; "I have a great belief in him. He's immense. I don't know if he's a rogue or a hero, but I know he spells something

fine for us — in what direction, death or glory, I don't guess. Here's to him! Here's to the Quest!"

The wine foamed as we drank to the toast in a mood of some excitement. Cassilis looked down into his glass reflectively.

"Some seek the bubble, Reputation, at the cannon's mouth," he said. "Here is the bubble, Jack. See it break and dissolve into nothingness. *Tout passe, tout casse, tout lasse*. But it is n't Reputation we're seeking, is it? No, it's wealth, is n't it?"

"If you ask me," I said dryly, "it's merely adventure. I don't pin much on the treasure. It's a gamble; we've staked on the red, and are watching."

"Red!" says he, frowning. "I wonder. There are only two colors — red and black. Red wins, messieurs!"

There was a silence between us, and I believe we had both been started on the same course of thought by those idle words.

"Anyway, *faites votre jeu*, messieurs!" He laughed, and eyed casually an approaching waiter.

"Mr. Poindexter, sir?" the man was inquiring. I nodded. "Special messenger, sir."

I took a letter from a salver, and opened it. There was only one man who knew we were dining there, and that was — Yes, it was from Houston, a note written from an address in Clapham, and exhibiting urgency from a spluttering pen and blot marks. When I had read it, I handed it over to Cassilis.

"Rum!" said he. "It must have been a mighty sudden attack."

"Influenza has a way of knocking you down like a shot partridge," I said.

He mused. "Well, if he wants us to go on to Southampton without him, I suppose we must."

"Do you like leaving him behind?" I inquired.

"I'm hanged if I do," said Cassilis.

That was my view. I rose, and he followed my example.

"It seems to me this puzzle is only just beginning," I said, reaching for my hat.

"What fun!" murmured Cassilis, as the obsequious waiter held out his overcoat. "I suppose you're going to Clapham."

"My dear fellow, you're a wonder in the way of inference. I am."

"We are," he corrected.

At Clapham we found the address without difficulty, a substantial lodging-house in a respectable and quiet road. There seemed to be some delay between our admittance and Houston's reception of us. I fancy messages passed up-stairs, and questions were asked. But our bona fides being beyond challenge, we were presently ushered into the sick-room.

The man lay white and sickly under his tan, and he seemed feeble of movement and faltering of speech. Even for one under the sudden violence of la grippe, he appeared to present a figure of extravagant weakness. He had the ghost of his old jauntiness, but his eyes looked anxious as he spoke.

"I'm awfully sorry to be a nuisance like this. But it must n't interfere with our plans, Mr. Poindexter."

"I'm sorry you're down," I answered. "It must have been very unexpected."

"That's so," he said. "It does n't give you time to think much. But I'm all right. If you'll only get ahead, I'll feel more comfortable. If I can, and the doctor gives me a shadow of a chance, I'll join you to-morrow. If he does n't, I'll come by the following boat. I'm anxious you should n't lose this."

We talked a little more, and when we gave the promise to go on, I thought his relief showed in his face. Just as we turned to leave the room, I pulled out my cigarette case; took a cigarette and offered him one, as if mechanically. His long, strong fingers closed over it, and I lit a match for him.

Down-stairs and on the road Cassilis broke silence.

"What made you think of that?" he asked quickly.

"Did you notice the ash on the tray?" I asked. "And where's your nose, my son?"

"I did n't think — I was thinking of *him*, not of details," he replied, and then he laughed. "Fancy betraying himself like that! Influenza and smoking! Heavens, I could n't taste anything with influenza."

"Well, as it is n't influenza, we want to know what it is," I replied. "My idea is that it's a game."

Cassilis shook his head. "I don't know."

That was our cul-de-sac. We did n't know; and we had got no nearer to knowing next day, when we stood on the upper deck of the *Albuquerque* and looked over the side at the traffic on the pier.

"It seems certain that he can't get ahead of us

in time," was how Cassilis summed up our futile speculations in what, at all events, was a sort of consolation. Houston could n't. We had gone through innumerable time-tables and steamship companies' sailings, had visited offices, and considered ourselves experts in the South American lines and lists. We *must* reach our destination by the *Albuquerque* earlier than any one else.

We watched the passengers come aboard in that detached and idle mood which old travelers assume on these occasions. It was brisk, fine weather, and Cassilis smoked a cigar. There came up the gangway an old man with his daughter, the girl flurried and pretty, and her father with the unruffled dignity of an archangel; two young men of a sporting character, labeled idlers; an effusive party, trending to tears and chatter, mainly women; one tall, gaunt, sickly man with sunken eyes and thin gray hair, a pathetic figure, no doubt in search of health in some more fortunate climate; a Jew and his fat companion engrossed in serious talk, and oblivious of all else; a smart naval officer, blond and frank, on the lookout for a friend — or was it a fiancée?

Cassilis nudged my arm.

"Good Lord, Jack, do you see that on the pier?"

I had been looking at the gangway ladder, but now I followed his hand. From a bath chair was disengaging itself with slow care a figure, and the set of the head was familiar.

"Houston!"

Cassilis was staring. The man moved on the arm of an attendant up the ladder, and in painful prog-

ress reached the deck. Cassilis slipped from my side and descended to the main deck. I waited. He returned in ten minutes.

"Jack, this complicates the jigsaw. I was thinking I saw light before. Now I don't."

"I never did," I answered. "What does he say?"

"Oh, that he found the doctor would let him travel with precautions. He looks worried."

A porthole below us, but away to the right, was pushed open, and a girl in furs near me put her head over the taffrail and looked down. There was a face in the opening.

"Houston!" I said once more.

There was no material to afford fresh thought, but we had room for it. I fell to watching the pier and the gangway once more.

The stream moved to and fro, and the first bell went. It turned a perceptible current shoreward; but flotsam still came up the gangway ladder — a fussy woman with a weak-faced husband, some dark foreigners, a businesslike man with whiskers, a quiet man of fifty with a military bearing and an imperturbable mien, a cheerful, pink-faced man with a hand-bag, children in a hurry, and a man in uniform.

It was all ashore now, and within a few minutes the screw was threshing. We were warping out. Several yards of angry water separated us from the pier. I heard a little clap below, and saw Houston's porthole close. His face had vanished. Cassilis had scraped a superficial acquaintance with the girl in furs and was explaining the shore pleasantly to her; so I strolled along the deck and watched the town

dwindling swiftly behind us. Presently I found my way down to the saloon, and made inquiries of the chief steward, which resulted in my visiting Houston's cabin.

He was in bed, but was smoking a cigarette, and his face, though pale, wore a more cheerful look than when I had last seen him; and he greeted me cheerfully.

"I managed it, after all," he said.

"I'm glad of that," I replied. "I hardly thought you would yesterday, from the look of you."

"Oh, I'm a tough bird," he said, with nonchalance, and turned the conversation forthwith upon the voyage and our prospects.

I left him with a strong impression of his amazing vitality. It burned in his eyes, in the lean lines of his face, in the very muscularity of his spare body.

The voyage was of average dullness, broken only by the calling at intermediate ports in the South American continent, from Rio de Janeiro downward and outward. This touching at land broke the monotony, a monotony which was the more pronounced that our company was uninteresting. It was not numerous enough to arrest one as a passing crowd with which one mingles. For that, also, it stayed too long with one. One got to know too much, to see too much of one's fellow-travelers. It was not always easy to avoid them.

The women were ordinary, and incapable of arousing enthusiasm, even in young hearts; and the men were mostly familiar types, British merchants in Brazil and the Argentine, Portuguese returning,

military officers, commission agents en route for the Pacific.

Among these latter, indeed, I found more amusement than in the other classes. Cassilis professed an open affection for the "drummer," which I was disposed to share. Common, pushing, and far from electric, these raw pioneers, nevertheless, have an atmosphere of their own endurance and courage about them. They are frank, know what they want, and have no pretences. Two or three of these fell into a group and consorted together over cards, over dominoes, over grog, and stories in a corner of the saloon at night. There was Mackenzie, a big-boned Scot; Coop, a small cockney, and some others whose names I have mislaid.

Houston made his appearance on deck about a week after we left Southampton, and was in an optimistic mood. He was a man of some ceremony where women were concerned, and occupied himself with some of our fair passengers. None came amiss to him, though I think he preferred the girl whom Cassilis had originally discovered in furs, a minx, it seemed to me, very conscious of her own powers. However, she seemed popular aboard with both young and middle-aged men, and when no one else was about did not disdain the service of the drummers.

Houston had the air of a convalescent, and lolled back in his deck-chair at ease, punctuated with attentions to the various women who drifted past. It was not long before I knew there was something in the quick regard of his eye, but it was some time before I could exactly give it a name. Indeed, there was

no one name to it, but it became capable of analysis into several names; or at any rate I thought so. There was, I conceived, a certain watchfulness in his eyes, and there was suspicion; there was also something deeper and darker, as it were a primitive instinct driven out of action and all external exhibition, but taking refuge there. But if anything was clear about Houston, it was that he was perfect master of himself, a highly developed animal with a sensitive system of control.

On the whole, we got on very well together, though it would have been absurd to suppose that we were on friendly terms, except very superficially. A bond of business united us, and that was all, unless it was a bond also of interest in the vagaries of human character. Houston was on probation still, and was aware of it. He made confession of this fact quite openly, which was one of his most amiable traits.

"After what has passed, and the circumstances of our introduction, you are justified in precautions," he said coolly. "Take what you will, I make no complaint. It's the future, not the past, that's got to excuse me."

"We're in it for business, I guess," said Cassilis, with nonchalance, and I watched Houston's watchful eyes fasten on him.

There is nothing to record of that trip until two days before we reached Callao. We had dropped people at sundry ports, and were now a circumscribed company, including the girl, Miss Hammond, who was visiting relatives in Peru, and perhaps a dozen others. The little event arose out of Houston's

persistent gallantry. I don't know really how it began, but I believe she made a petulant complaint of her seat, and Houston sprang to her assistance. A big box stood in the way, and he stooped to trundle it off, but it resisted, and, as I was moving to his aid, I saw his face turn. It whitened, and he fell away. I called out, but by that time he was limp on the deck. However, Cassilis and I, with a steward, got him down-stairs and pulled him round with a nip of brandy. He sat up with a wide, silly smile.

"Did I go off? What a damn nuisance! Thanks, awfully." He seemed in an anxiety to get us from the cabin. "I think I'll rest, if you don't mind."

We shuffled out, and Cassilis walked up the companionway beside me without conversation.

"That was it, then?" he said at last.

"What?" I asked, in surprise.

"Didn't you see? No, you were on the wrong side. When we loosened the shirt, I saw it plain enough. I wonder why this mystery."

"My dear fellow, indeed I am asking myself —" I began, impatiently.

"A knife wound," he said succinctly. "I should judge quite a deep one, and very recent. That was the explanation, of course, of his fainting. It's hardly healed. And that, too, was the explanation of the influenza. I wonder why."

I was startled. A knife wound!

"Why should Houston have pretended something else?"

"Ask me another," said Cassilis, shrugging his shoulders.

There was silence between us. "I'll be hanged if I begin to understand one little thing about it all," I said impatiently.

"Oh, I *begin* —" said Cassilis. "That's easy enough. It's afterwards I'm beaten. I can get as far as this — that some one is after the Big Fish as well as ourselves."

"We know that from my adventure in the auction room," I agreed. "But why the attack on Houston?"

Cassilis stood musing. "I think we shall have a lively holiday over yonder," he said at last, as he looked landward where the Andine ranges smouldered in the mist.

As a matter of fact, I had always been of that opinion, though when we got ashore at Callao it was agreeable enough. The place was strange to both of us, and although we felt it was but the prelude to our real business, the sensation of enlargement after the restrictions of sea life was eminently pleasant. Houston set to work at once. He was not anxious that we should follow him, and he disappeared, we knew not where, the very afternoon of our arrival.

"I will communicate with you," he said. "I'll make the preliminary preparations. The less fuss the better."

"Do you think he means to skip?" inquired Cassilis, looking after him doubtfully.

"No," said I; but I did n't know why I thought

not. But I was right. We had been three days at Callao when we got word from Houston conveying instructions; and, acting upon them, we took a coastwise boat to Mollendo. Cassilis and I had taken a run to Lima, where the young lady who had interested him had been deposited; and here we had the privilege of meeting two of our "drummers," the Scot and Coop. Coop was a little, screw-faced cockney, with a lively tongue, a chatty vulgarian with shrewd eyes and a nose for business. Mackenzie was raw-boned and rather cantankerous in manner, but capable, I judged, and very persistent. He was agent for an engineering firm, while his companion traveled in cotton goods. Coop talked pretty large, as if he were going to make Peru, to say nothing of Bolivia, into an appanage of Lancashire. He was destined for La Paz later, and wanted to know if we included the place in our itinerary. I assented, at which he was good enough to show satisfaction.

"Glad we sha'n't part yet awhile," he said. "These dagos get on my nerves. It's like living on macaroni all day and every day."

At Arequipa, however, which we reached from Mollendo, there was no obvious European save Houston. The journey from the coast through the lower Andes was a tedious affair, for one soon wearied of the monotony of barren peaks and crags and wild, empty plateaus. Arequipa came as a surprise, with its brilliant sunshine and white walls, a mediæval Spanish town, perched seven thousand feet above the sea, and sunk in inglorious superstition. Houston, who met us at the hotel, as it was called, was far

advanced with his preparations, and had improved amazingly in appearance. He had regained his brown color, and looked like a lean, active — well — panther was the figure that rose instinctively to my mind when I saw him. He had been incredibly busy during these three days, and I don't think I was ever drawn nearer to liking him than when seeing him there, resolute, capable, industrious, and cheerful; with an air of having resources at his back. We had reached Arequipa towards evening, and it was over the evening meal that we learned of his preparations. He had the outfit, as he called it, at a fonda, some distance away, and it was in readiness for an immediate start. He seemed eager to be off, and suggested that we should leave on the following morning. There was nothing to keep us in Arequipa unless it were church services, and so Cassilis and I fell in with this plan, and it was understood when we went to bed that we should make a start early on the morrow.

Some hours before dawn I was awakened by a noise, and, being aroused, realized that some one was knocking on my door.

"What is it?" I called out.

Houston's face appeared in the widening aperture.

"Do you mind if we alter our plans?" he asked, "and start now, I mean?"

I sat up and looked at him. "I think it would be best for all of us that we should understand each other," I said sharply. "Perhaps you will be good enough to explain the change."

"It's about time," said he, nodding. "I didn't want to disturb either of you, but I see it's got to

be. You remember the *other* folk who were after your box?"

"I remember all about the box pretty well," I answered dryly.

"I'm afraid they've got wind of us. It's the Black Gang," he added shortly, "and their reputation is over the Andes."

"What reason have you for supposing —" I began.

"Take it that I saw some one — a shadow. I recognized something I'd once seen. Anyway, you've got it as straight from me as you can get it. It is n't safe here. If we linger, it may be too late. Werner's dangerous. Our only chance is to make tracks now."

"Werner!" I repeated, as the name echoed down the chambers of my memory.

"I believe that's the leader's name," said Houston, indifferently. "I'll rouse Mr. Cassilis, then, if you're agreeable."

As I dressed, it seemed to me that I knew the name of Werner, and that I had not heard Houston refer to it before. I dressed in a speculative mood, and found Houston waiting for me.

"I've settled with the hotel men," said he. "They won't trouble their heads about why and wherefore, but I've mentioned a dying friend. For the sake of better security, I don't want us all to go in a lump. If I was right about what I saw, I think we'd better scatter. I suppose you can ride by compass, Mr. Poindexter."

I nodded, and awaited his instructions. When

Cassilis was ready, he also received his. The masterly way in which the man had his plans cut and dried, and the coolness with which he distributed them, invited my admiration. There was, too, something exhilarating in this midnight flitting, and it was not without enjoyment that I found myself alone in the darkness, pressing northwest into a blind night on a blank, blind road. Cassilis, I gathered, was gone north, but I did not know where Houston was. If I had any momentary temptation to doubt his good faith, I remembered that he need not have given us notice at all, but could have taken French leave of us any time during the past three days.

I rode for the better part of an hour, and then a little starlight refreshed the sky. The track was across the plateau land, which in these parts fall under the general name of puna. There was at this time no sound to keep me company. My mule stumbled along through the coarse grass and sedges over the uneven surface, and sometimes waded through swampy waters. Occasionally I consulted my compass by the light of an electric torch I carried. And now for the first time, I began to experience that nausea which comes of the rarefied air, and is known there as the soroche. It grew upon me as I mounted higher, until it was almost more than I could bear. The cold was intense also, and the pools were thinly frozen over. It seemed to me as if my lungs were afire. I pulled in the mule, and rested on the saddle to recover myself, for the nausea had reached a formidable pitch, and then almost unconsciously I slipped from the saddle and lay there in the open

night. Gradually I got better of the fit, and took in my surroundings. Overhead the eyes of the stars opened dimly; the great, white mass of the Cordilleras towards Lake Titicaca blocked the prospect; and a small wind whistled among the long grasses. Westward, and still invisible, were the declining Sierras and the long, shelving nakedness of the coastal plains.

Suddenly I was aware of something black and heavy that swept down and by with swishing wings, and I drew myself together instinctively, for I had a guess of what this must be, a foul bird moving in the night upon its obscene way. It must be the vulture of the Andes, the hideous condor.

It passed, and I turned my attention once more to the trail. I examined my compass, took a nip of brandy, and mounted afresh. As I sat in my saddle I thought I heard a sound. It was not the sound of the condor's wings, but something different. I gathered the reins and started, and so blunderingly crossed a spur in the mountains, and descended into a valley beyond. Half an hour later I heard voices, and the next thing I knew was that Houston was at my mule's head. He had arrived some time before me, and we waited anxiously for Cassilis. Meanwhile I ate of some food which Houston's forethought had prepared, and drank hot coffee with gratitude.

The camp was in a hollow among shrubs, and was fairly extensive. Houston had picked up his Cholo Indians at the fonda, and had struck off for the place of rendezvous; his arrival had been calculated

to a nicety. But he displayed considerable anxiety till Cassilis came in, and then he seemed relieved.

“No sign of any one?” he asked.

Cassilis replied in the negative.

“No, I don’t suppose he knows about you,” said Houston, thoughtfully, “nor Mr. Poindexter. It’s me that was the danger.”

“I wonder!” I said, and I remembered the faint and unexplained sounds.

But Houston was not taking any risks, and at sunrise the camp was on the march.

CHAPTER V

THE LAW OF THE WILD

THE trail was still upward, and I should think, by the following afternoon, we must have been something like fourteen thousand feet above the sea. The whole countryside was ugly, and naked as a quarry, and the heavy mists blotted out the superior peaks. By evening cold rain fell, and we pitched camp in a blizzard. All night the tempest roared. The wind blew cold as ice, and tore at the fastenings of the tents. The noise was terrific; so that at last I gave up the attempt to sleep, and crawled out into the open, where a murky light was gathering over the Sierra.

We seemed to be encamped on the neck of a precipice. The pack mules stood patiently in hobbles, with their heads bent meekly and wearily to the storm. The darkness rolled from the tents over black spur and valley to the deeper blackness of the snow-clad and invisible scarps of the Cordillera. I made up the fire, and shivered, and went back to the tent. Cassilis was asleep uneasily, and I sat in the mouth of the tent and kept watch.

As I sat, I seemed to see, away in the vacant grayness of the dissolving night, a point of light,

almost as if it had been the distant reflection of our own fire. I rose and kicked the logs into leaping flame. Far off, the point of light disappeared. I resumed my place and fastened my eyes on the distance, but I saw nothing more. I was glad at last when the Indians began to stir as they set about preparing the meal. The brief, savage storm had passed, and the morning was clear. Houston joined me presently, looking fresh and vigorous.

"Are you still afraid of being followed?" I asked him.

He looked at me inquiringly. "I don't know that I'm afraid," he said slowly.

I told him of what I thought I had seen, and he turned and called to one of the Indians, who immediately set off with a companion at a loping run down the hill.

"I've sent him back on the trail," he observed. "If there's any one, we shall know it."

He ate his breakfast without perturbation, and Cassilis, who was now roused, and I followed his example. The Indians returned ere we started, and reported that there was no sign of any one for miles back on the trail.

"The rain!" I suggested.

Houston said nothing, but afterwards I knew that he was as little satisfied as myself. However, we turned to the work of the day's journey without more discussion, and made a good distance ere we pitched for the night. The way ran along a great spur of the mountains with a dry ravine below, and the trail looked down from the edge at times into sheer

space. Here the soroche attacked Cassilis, rending him as it had been some biblical evil spirit. He lay on the ground where we rested, helpless and gasping, and it was with difficulty that we got him along. The sun shone on the white fields of the Andine peaks northward and southward. Somewhere in the hollows of the hills lay Lake Titicaca. I had the curiosity, now that it would convey some idea to my mind, to inquire of Houston concerning our destination. You will remember that Raymond's instructions mentioned Astarnok, and Houston had spoken of Astarnok as a remote Trans-Andine village. I wanted now to know how far Astarnok lay from us.

I thought Houston looked oddly at me as he answered: "I reckoned it to be eighteen days from Arequipa."

"Eighteen days!" I echoed.

Eighteen days of this! I stared from Cassilis, racked as he was, down the trail and back to Cassilis again. Nothing was visible, absolutely nothing but barren rock and jutting crag, the grasses and the cactus of the Sierra.

At night Cassilis was better and slept. The cold was still intense, and kept me wakeful. I had a pain in my lungs. Outside the tent I heard an Indian coughing. I dozed, and then started of a sudden into full life, conscious of a sound. I pushed open the tent flap and peered. Cassilis's stertorous breathing filled the air.

The night was full of cloud and broken light, and among the pack mules I thought I detected an alien shadow. I crept out, and stared. There was a stir

in the Indians' camp up the slope, and then, ere I knew what had happened, the shadow flitted over the edge of the trail, and disappeared, swallowed into the darkness of the gorge below.

Simultaneously I heard a crack behind me, and was aware of Houston, rifle in hand. I ran forward, passed the line of mules, who were struggling in confusion and terror at the alarm, and struck down the slope of the gorge where the shadow had fled. It was a rough track in the uncertain light, and I did not know how steep the descent was, but I did know that the river ran a thousand feet down. At any moment I might miss my step, or go over a vertical height. Something was blundering behind me, and I halted. It was Houston.

"Got him?" he asked eagerly.

"No sign," I answered back.

He had reached me. "I could never have missed, even in the dark," he said confidently. "Try slant-wise. It will be easier going."

We changed our direction, and advanced with more circumspection, twenty paces between us. The dim lights of heaven but faintly illumined a vague earth. I recalled my electric torch, and pressed it. A slight ray sprang out and forward like a search-light, full on the black hillside. Houston called out, and bounded down to me.

"About thirty paces off, lying flat. I knew I got him," he said sharply.

I flashed the gleam again, and made out the figure crawling painfully. His head was away from us. We moved by common impulse toward the quarry.

The clouds, passing from the field of stars, left the gorge in slender light, which revealed the crawling body ahead. Once Houston came to a pause, and I heard him say under his breath:

“Blood! I knew I got him.”

He rubbed his hand on the grasses and resumed his way carefully. Several times the figure halted and seemed to rest, and Houston’s hand detained me. I had time to ask myself what we did there, and by what rights we had shot down a wandering stranger. But I got no answer, even from my own conscience. After about half an hour’s painful progress, the thing ahead got to its feet, and was revealed as a man in the native dress. He stumbled and staggered forward, and we pressed after him, still unseen.

“He’s homing,” said Houston in a whisper.

A little later he disappeared behind a projection of rock. Houston and I approached cautiously, Houston’s rifle in his hand, and my revolver in my belt. We peered round the face of the rock.

“Hands up!” suddenly cried Houston, in a tone I had not heard from him. And “Your light,” he shouted at me.

I pressed the bulb of the torch, and, as the stream spread, uttered an exclamation. Under the rock, crouched on a sort of bag, was the drummer Coop, whom I had last seen in Lima.

“So it’s you, Coop, is it?” said Houston very quietly.

“Yes, it’s me. How are you?” he replied easily. “Been shootin’?”

Houston had been looking him over, and now spoke in the same quiet voice. "Ever been at this game before?"

"Traveled in most lines," said the cockney, with nonchalance. "Ain't it striking cold? Have a drink?"

He was busy pouring something from a little bottle into a horn cup.

"There's time to go back," said Houston, still quietly. "As you say, we've been shooting."

"Careless like," said Coop, tossing off his liquor. "I guess you winged one of my men. You can't be too careful in these crowded parts."

"No; accidents will happen," said Houston meaningly.

"Well, if you won't drink," said Coop, yawning, "with your permission, I'll snatch a wink of sleep."

I fancy we looked a pair of fools before this vulgar cockney. I spoke at last.

"It is obvious that you are following us, Coop. Understand we'll take all steps to prevent that."

"My dear old man, I'm only out for my health," he said. "Doctor's orders."

He had his tongue stuck in his cheek as he leered at us. I felt Houston pluck at my coat, and I turned. He said nothing, but began to move away; and so I followed. It seemed a weak and inglorious ending, with the honors against us, but Houston paid no heed.

"Now we know, it's all right," he said, smiling. "I'm glad to have seen what sort of fool he is."

It is n't like Werner to use an instrument of that sort — at least, it's not his reputation."

"But he's located us," I said.

"Yes," assented Houston, and added after a pause: "It would have been wiser not to have shown himself. If I thought Werner would have used such a fool, I would have spotted him aboard."

"Perhaps that was what Werner reckoned," I suggested dryly.

There was something sinister in him that moment. I could not have said what it was, but he affected me with a little sudden repulsion. I was kept busy with my thoughts on the way back, and on arriving at the camp found Cassilis had been disturbed, and had crept out of the tent. He listened to our explanations and lay down with a groan. Houston moved away.

"Jack, it's getting hot," he said. "If it was n't for this accursed sickness, I don't know that I should mind much. But one seems to be walking about in an atmosphere of brimstone."

"There's certainly a stiff problem before us," I said. "We can't afford to let Coop track us."

"No," he assented, and then, "Houston won't."

"The question is how to stop it," I said.

"You've had a hint this night," said Cassilis.

"I know. That makes me uneasy. I don't know how far we are prepared to go. Anyway, I don't know how far *I'm* prepared to go. Do you?"

"No," he answered bluntly.

There was a little silence between us. "I think Houston has no limits," I added.

"The question is — can we fix any for him?" asked Cassilis. "We're in No Man's Land."

"Anyway, we've got to try," I said conclusively. "I'm in for freebooting, but not necessarily for freeshooting."

Cassilis was overtaken by a paroxysm. Ere we turned in for the remainder of the night, I think we understood that it was our business to "limit" Houston.

We made an early start. Now that there was no object in concealment, Coop let his camp stray. Quite patently a mestizo, a half-caste Indian, played sentinel half a mile down the spur, and we could see the smoke of their fires. Our men stared with interest, but indicated little surprise, and unemotionally and mechanically we loaded up and started on the slow descent into the cañon.

Between us, Cassilis and I were conversant with travel in most countries. Our experiences included Siberia at its wildest, trekking in African highlands, penetrating Liberian jungles, starving in Australian deserts, and sledding it in Labrador and the Klondyke. But we neither of us remembered anything quite like that trail in the Cordillera. Coop gave up any pretence at secrecy. He was out to follow, and he adhered to our tracks like a hound. He had the impudence of Satan, and under his easy-going grin I believe he had the ethics of that prince of evil. Anyway, he had audacity such as I had never encountered in any one before. He was shameless. His camp was pitched at a nice, airy distance from us each night, and each night he kept watch on us.

I knew that, for I tested him more than once. Meanwhile, Cassilis and I were amazed at the conduct of Houston. He made his arrangements each day unperturbed, and as if Coop and his camp did not exist. He ignored them; it was almost as if he had forgotten them. But he hadn't, as you will see.

It was the fourth night after the discovery that Coop turned up in our camp. He was looking white of face through the tan, and his breath was labored. He wheezed out of his chest as if it had been a broken concertina.

"Got any whisky, old man?" he asked, in a piping, cheerful voice.

I stared. "Take a seat, Mr. Coop," said Cassilis, in a friendly way.

"Ah!" he sighed, and I recognized the handmarks of the soroche scrawled all over him. "I don't like the climate. What do you say to a game of nap or poker?"

Outside in the half light, I could see Houston's head, small and dark, as he listened.

"I tell you what, Coop," said Cassilis, as if inspired by a sudden happy thought, "I'll play you at cards or throw you dice for a shot at you at twenty paces."

"No deal," he said, with a sickly grin. "My life's too valuable, and I can't shoot a haystack, five yards off."

Houston's voice rang in now. "Cold, Coop, eh? Sick, Coop, eh? How far do you feel like going?"

He laughed lightly, and it was at that moment that I guessed what he had been doing. We were not on the trail for Astarnok. He was leading Coop a dance through this terrible wilderness. Why?

Cassilis answered my question later that night, after the stricken wretch had crawled back to his camp.

"It would have been merciful to have shot him," he said. "Houston will have no mercy."

"He's altered the course. Heaven knows where we are now," I replied.

"Have you thought why?" asked Cassilis, in a lower voice. "White bones tell no tales in this God-forgotten wilderness."

"You mean —"

"Coop's walking to his own grave."

It was evident this was true, whether Houston contemplated violence or merely starvation. On the whole, with Cassilis, I think violence would have been more merciful. Somehow I began to look upon ourselves as Houston's prisoners, as well as Coop. We could do nothing without him, and he had only to hold up a hand to the Indians, and we were left to perish. But he said nothing, merely set his marches, conversed amiably, and ignored Coop. Coop stuck to us like a burr. It was a dismal procession in a desolate land. There were ten paces of naked rock and land, then some grasses — ten more paces of nakedness, and then some cactus — more nakedness — all the way down a bleak, black gulch, and then a roaring, freezing torrent — then up a scarp; then

ten paces of naked rock and land — then more grasses — more nakedness.

Faugh! I had the taste of it in my mouth, and the smell of it in my nostrils. Life had all vanished at that elevation, for we touched the eternal snows. It worked on my nerves, and I began to get quarrelsome. The sickness descended on me again; my body was sore, my feet bled, and my boots were in tatters. Cassilis, I think, was somewhat recovered.

I remember little of that night when Houston and I quarreled. I believe I was light-headed, for, though I have heard since from Cassilis what I said and did, I can recall next to nothing save an angry atmosphere. It began with my annoyance at his bearing. His appearance, the set of his head, his watchful, smiling eyes irritated me beyond endurance. This was the man who had led us out into the wilderness to die! This was the man, smiling, complacent devil, who was dragging us weary marches on the naked Sierra, till we should drop by the way and perish of starvation, of cold, of disease! I saw in a flash now his diabolic scheme. He had designed all along to end us out there, so that he might enjoy alone the infinite riches of the great treasure. With that my control snapped. Cassilis says that I sprang at him and poured forth invective. I was mad in that hour, and he held me back. Houston shrugged his shoulders.

"If you're tired of it, it can stop," he said. "I only wanted to do it with the least mess. I thought you would approve. Well, anyway, we're all tired of it."

He got up on that and went out, leaving me staring. Cassilis pulled me down.

"Man, you've done it," he exclaimed. "Jack, you're mad, and you've signed Coop's death warrant."

"I don't care," I growled, and I turned my face to the tent covering and groaned.

Cassilis went out hastily, and when I awoke from a doze he was sitting opposite. I felt weak, but I was sane now.

"What's the time?" I asked.

He bade me go to sleep, and I must have slept again.

I woke just before dawn, and heard the deep breathing of Cassilis at the farther side of the tent. I moved the flap aside and went out, and the cold blast from the eternal snows greeted me like pepper on my raw face. There was a storm upon the peak above us, thrashing round and round it in a giddy circle. But I was glad to get out, and I walked through the camp noiselessly. Somehow I felt new strength, and I wondered why I had quarreled with Houston and over what.

I had gone about half a mile in the grayness that precedes dawn when I saw fires ahead, and I realized that this must mark the boundaries of Coop's camp. As the light strengthened, it stood out low and black, and I noticed a stir in it. The mules were in a string together, wretched, patient creatures, with their tails to the wind. Suddenly, there was a report in the air. I saw the foremost mule, which stood a little isolated and picked out from its fellows, go down

in a huddle. There was a second shot, and another fell; and on the third crack the camp was in a lively commotion.

I stood where I was, gazing in wonder, and I have no doubt that I was a visible object now against the dawn. Two mestizos came running, and there was a report again. I was aware that a bullet had gone by me. It was evident that I was a mark for them; and I slunk behind a rock. As I did so, another bullet spattered on it. From the near distance I heard the repeated sound of rifles, and I looked out. The mestizos were gone, and I made my way back to camp. Stalking through the half light was another figure, which I recognized.

"Is that you, Houston?" I called.

He halted till I reached him, and a curious smile played over his face. "Satisfied?" he asked.

"I don't understand," I said.

"Well, we're all sick of it, are n't we?" he said, slinging his rifle on his shoulder.

"Was that you?" I asked, suddenly interpreting things.

"They're six miles short," he said, as he flung himself down by the fire we had reached.

Cassilis was there, anxious and curious, and explanations were made to him.

"Coop's got too much commissariat."

Suddenly Houston put back his head and laughed.

When he had gone, Cassilis turned to me. "That was what he meant when he promised me," he murmured.

"Promised you!" I echoed, vacantly.

"Jack, you forced the pace last night," he went on, in a kindly voice. "I don't blame you. This place is enough — but I had an understanding with Houston. He said nothing should happen —"

I reflected. "Coop will have to abandon his stores," I said presently.

"Well, if he does —" Cassilis broke off. "Don't you see there's the question of retaliation?"

Yes, I did. Houston, however, betrayed no alarm. He kept a good watch the next night, and had the mules under cover of the rocks. As for the daytime there was no cause for anxiety. Apart from Houston himself, there was no better shot than Cassilis; and I myself had seen service in the ranges. None of Coop's lot would dare venture anything against us in broad light. Indeed, we heard nothing, and saw nothing save the fires at night, like glow-worms twinkling in the ravines.

The third day after the shooting of the mules, we got through a defile in the mountains, and came out upon a narrow track that wound round the bluff face of a chasm. Below, yawned a precipice of a thousand feet, with a bottom of tumbled rocks and boulders.

"This is a regular trail," I said. "Where does it lead?"

Houston looked down the ravine. "Over into the Montana country," he said.

"Is it ours?" I asked.

"Yes," he said simply.

Cassilis and I stared at him; but he made no sign. What had he decided to do with Coop, Coop

who was limping behind on the trail, fighting each day a more desperate fight? Coop must have known by this how he had been fooled, and diverted on a wild-goose chase.

We jogged along the track, which was in some places but eight or ten feet in width, with the wall of the mountain above us and the black gulch below. We went in single file, Houston leading with one of the Indians, Cassilis next, and myself close behind; and then the pack mules with their burdens, with the rest of the Cholos distributed among them. Across the cañon stretched height on height, barren and bleak and broken. It made the blood freeze.

Suddenly one of the Indians in the rear called out, and I turned. I looked over the string of mules, and saw several heads raised among the beasts, and pointed backwards. The pack covered a space of thirty yards, and the hindermost was not yet visible round a twist in the hillside. The Cholos in the rear were shouting and gesticulating, and one or more were facing us with eager and alarmed eyes. I could not catch what they said in Spanish. Houston, away in front, had halted, but he could see less than I from where he stood.

“What the devil — ” I was beginning, when one of the Indians, named Diego, ran into sight at the tail of our procession. At the same time there was a terrified movement among the mules, seeming to pass electrically from the rear.

“Look, look, by —— !” cried Cassilis.

He seemed beside himself. The ledge where I was

curved inwards, and I strained my eyes to see what it was that had alarmed him. The mules heaved forward and spread about me, pushing me into the wall, and, as I recovered, to my horror I saw an animal forced outward in the mêlée, stagger over the edge, and fall into the space, pack and all. I cried out and tried to move backwards, but I was jammed in the press; the breath of one scared beast was blowing in my face. I had, however, managed to work myself beyond a projecting rock, and I had a clear view now of the rear; though I was unable to extricate myself for action.

Coop, borne upon a big mule, was driving forward among our beasts, and was striking them with a heavy goad. Terrified by the assault, they gave way, and, as I took this in, two more lost their footing and went over the dreadful precipice, with horrid screams. Coop laughed and struck again, wedging a frightened Indian against the mountain-side with the rump of his beast. Houston was yelling from behind me, and pulling at something in his saddle. A fifth mule went over; and Coop turned in the narrow space with surprising dexterity, and I saw, to my amazement, that his legs were locked together under the belly of his mule! He was tied to his mount! A report rang out, and I saw Houston's rifle at his shoulder. Coop swayed, but his beast quickened, and, as he passed behind the curve, I saw the man's wasted body shaking and shivering in the saddle like a parcel of loose bones.

We quieted the mules, and made an examination of our losses. Houston's eyes had drawn small

and narrow and deeply back, as it seemed, into their sockets.

"He's guessed; it's his last act; it's his revenge," said Cassilis.

I sat on the ledge and lit a pipe, while the Indians, having secured the remnant of the mules, stood quietly by and puffed their cigarettes.

I looked at Houston. "Can we make out with what mules and supplies we've got?" I asked.

"We have twelve," said he, in a cracked voice.

"Twelve!" I echoed, for I could only see half a dozen pack mules left.

"There are those behind," he said, moving off. I looked interrogatively at Cassilis.

"He must mean Coop's," he said.

I had not thought of that. Of course there were Coop's, justly forfeited by that savage act of war. Houston was already giving orders to retrace the way, and, the Indians shepherding the mules, we wound carefully about the face of the precipice. By the time we had got back to the saddle of the mountains, it was near dusk, but Houston did not rest. Diego, despatched to reconnoiter, located Coop's camp about three miles back in a natural cairn; and it was barely dark when we started, all armed.

The first thing that struck me as we came up was the absence of any sentry after Coop's desperate attack on us. Then, as we drew nearer, under a rising moon, there were no signs of life; and finally we were brought up with the tents in full light, and nothing in the eye save naked rock.

Houston went first, and I followed warily, as you

may suppose, after our recent adventure. Houston stalked to a tent, and threw open the flaps. The moon struck in, and showed us emptiness. The place was deserted.

"We're too late," said Houston hungrily.

I pushed past him round the upstanding rocks, and came upon the body of a mestizo, dead as a door-nail, with his hand on a broken bridle, and a bullet in his heart. Five feet away lay Coop, unconscious, thin as a wisp, and barely breathing, but with a revolver in his weak fingers. The mestizo had been shot as he was making off. There were no other signs of any human being on the slopes.

The whole case unrolled itself now before me. Coop had been deserted by his men, and robbed of his remaining mules, while he lay on his sick-bed. His last effort had been made against us that afternoon, when he was next door to a corpse, and had had himself strapped upon his beast lest he should fall off. That spirit, indomitable in a little vulgar cockney, demanded recognition. Mentally I took off my hat to him.

Houston looked down on the remains.

"It's just as well," he said. "It saves trouble."

Diego, whom we had brought with us, was exploring in the moonlight, and now returned with news which he communicated to his master. Houston nodded. "We shall have the contents of a pack, anyway," he explained to us. "The Indians have made a clear track of it."

Coop moaned, and he regarded the body indifferently.

"Saved us trouble," he repeated.

"We can't leave him like this, of course," said Cassilis.

Houston turned in a leisurely way. "We can talk it over at supper," he said. "There don't seem many alternatives. May I ask if either of you gentlemen has had any medical training?"

We both disclaimed knowledge of that sort.

"Well, you don't propose to salve much of Coop, then," he went on, with what was very much like a sneer. "I've seen enough of things in this altitude to know. That's a dead man. And, anyway, if he is n't, it's not our funeral."

The phrase had an ironic, a savage aptness.

"We can't leave him," said I, standing by Cassilis.

"My good sir, what do you propose?" asked Houston, as if appealing to our reason. "We can't heal him. To take him with us to higher altitudes would only hasten his fate. There's no means of sending him back. He's a goner in any case. And he took his risks in war. He knew it. Look at this afternoon. In war, men are shot at sight for that."

That seemed to recall something to him, and he bent over Coop and examined him. "I thought so," he said, with an air of proud triumph, "though it was a galloping shot."

"Was he hit?" I asked, feeling somehow vaguely that this added to the horror.

Houston nodded. "He's done for — clean. Can't live out the night."

"We can't leave him," I broke out angrily.

"It's all very well, but it's not human," Cassilis added to my protest.

Houston gathered himself up. "Anyway, let's get back. We can't do anything now," he said.

That was true enough. We had no mules, and we could not carry Coop across the wild country without one. Reluctantly we followed our leader, but not until Cassilis and I had dragged the helpless Coop into the shelter of the tent. He had fallen blankly still when we left him. I wondered if he still lived.

The camp had gone on and was pitched beyond the dangerous defile when we reached it. It was then about nine o'clock, and the spare supper was spread for us. Houston talked.

"This is war, gentlemen," he said. "If you imagined it was going to be anything else when Werner took hold, you've been deceiving yourselves. It's not a Sunday-school business at the best, and at the worst it's — anyway, don't waste good sympathy on carrion like Coop. He had his shot and misfired. It's our turn. I reckon that's how the universe goes. It wheels on opportunity. You may bet your life ours won't come uppermost again if we throw this away." A little later he said: "If we're going to carry this through, it's no use turning sentimental. Coop's one of Werner's pawns sacrificed. It was our business to see that he did n't make good, and we did." He paused. "To think the fellow spent himself in merely keeping tabs on us! He was worthy better employment. Anyway,

that's done with. Nothing we can do could keep him alive. We may be in as bad a case as he presently."

There was something in that rare air. I have told you how I went mad one night. Well, there's a poisonous quality in climate. Look at the revelations of African travel. I make no excuses. I think Cassilis and I merely ceased to argue. I sank into slumber, oblivious of Coop. I must have been awakened by the noise of the mules; for when I went out the moon was full overhead, and I could see figures moving at a little distance. I heard Indian voices, and then Houston's. I stood restless, uneasy.

I was aware that a shadow had joined me.

"Awake?" I said casually.

"Yes, and being awakened, I do despise my dream," quoted Cassilis, softly.

"You feel like that?" I asked. "I've been asking myself these last five minutes if it's the same John Poindexter who once —"

"Yes, it is," he said. "Let's get to work."

"You mean —"

"My dear boy, we can only mean one thing," he said. "We'd better take a mule, of course."

I don't think we said anything more on the subject, but merely went on with our preparations quietly. Houston must have gone to lie down, for we saw no more of him; and our arrangements met with no interruption.

We reached Coop's deserted camp with a round moon wheeling overhead, and lighting the naked

rocks on all sides. It was like a Golgotha, I thought, a place of skulls, of bones, a charnel house.

We found our way to the tent and opened it. Coop was not there.

It was some time before we had convinced ourselves that the body had disappeared, and then I think the same thought struck both of us in the one minute. What had Houston been doing? I was conscious of a rising nausea in the pit of my stomach.

"Houston 's been here," said Cassilis, putting our fears in shape.

"I saw him with the mules in the camp," I assented.

"He wanted to make sure," said Cassilis, drearily. "Does n't it run 'mak' siccar' in the old Scotch story?"

I did n't answer. "It 's what we committed ourselves to," he went on. "I don't know that he 's much more guilty than we."

"Don't tell me that," I broke out fiercely. "What are we here for? And what was he here for?"

Cassilis shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps he was more beneficent," he said. "The sooner it 's over the sooner to sleep."

"Anyway, I 'm not going on without an understanding with that murdering ruffian," I exclaimed.

"Oh, we are, we are," said Cassilis, impatiently. "He 's the only man among us. What are we — both of us? Wrecks, remnants, shadows of civilization. I have no doubt we 'll breed our own new rules in the new conditions. Coop was merely an incident."

We made our way back, a prey to gloomy thoughts. Cassilis was right, we were committed to our fate. We had been committed to it, as a matter of fact, from the hour in which we struck that bargain with Houston. We should go back and say nothing. What was there to say? Houston had acted by the law of the wilderness.

CHAPTER VI

THE RECOVERY

CASSILIS was right. We never broached the subject to Houston. We crept back as we had stolen forth, like thieves in the night, afraid, furtive, with a strange new scheme of perverted feelings. The law of the wild was growing up about us, and moulding us. I saw it in the naked crags, in the desolate puna, in the everlasting snow fields. Houston was the only one of the three who made any pretence of cheerfulness, and I could not but see that it was an effort on his part. He left us pretty much to ourselves, but when he did mix in our company he was comparatively loquacious. I have said he talked well, and he had a store of experience from which to draw. I sometimes wondered how rich the store might be, and how much he dare bring into the light. Cassilis had grown silent, even surly. I could not recognize in him the bright, resilient, confident nature which had always attracted me. He seemed fallen flat, as if under weights, and to make no response to external things. By this time we were both acclimatized to the mountain sickness, but I wondered if there were an aftermath — what the

doctors call "sequelæ," as in the case of influenza. I did not like the idea of Cassilis moody, brooding.

He broke it to me on the second day. Houston, freed of his masters, had set his compass for the goal of our hopes. We had gathered that we were within a week's camp of Astartok. The word rang on his lips as it were from a clarion. Cassilis stirred, cleaned out his pipe, and watched the back of the man as he went from us, clean, upstanding, lithe, a handsome, sinister being.

"Jack, do you remember that night?" Cassilis was speaker.

I pondered. I knew in a minute, but "What night?" I asked peevishly. It was only three days old, but it seemed to be buried history. The savage peak of the Cordillera across the gorge was like some agony in the Inferno of Dante. I saw damned human souls climbing it and falling.

"Jack," said Cassilis, in a lower voice, losing somehow the whole of that distance which had come between us, "Jack, we'll never reach the place, and we shall find nothing."

"Why the devil should n't we?" I asked impatiently.

Cassilis was looking down into the black gorge, with a musing eye. "Don't you think Coop'll do it?" he asked.

I stirred uneasily. What had flashed through a weakened brain in the dead watches of the night, when it seemed hard to breathe the thin air?

"Superstitious?" I shot at him in a sneer.

He lit his pipe slowly. "No; it's conviction.

You've got it. Coop will do for us in death what he failed in life." He shuddered. "I feel Coop all about."

"Look here, Dick," I said firmly. "Drop all that. It's bad enough to face the facts and the circumstances, let alone inventing and imagining."

He made no answer to this, but presently he knocked out his pipe and laughed. "I'd like to see Houston's face when Coop does him out of it," he said.

Of course he was abnormal. I can see that now. But at the time it did not seem so odd. He had got home when he had suggested that I myself had been obsessed by certain feelings. Coop was becoming a burden to both of us — not, I mean, a burden of conscience, for we had come to accept the law of the wild, but rather a burden of vengeance. I think we both hated Coop. I know I did. But something was pursuing us, and we both dimly recognized what it was. In death the cockney was as vulgar as in life, but he was more formidable. He rode the air.

Houston was never affected, as far as we could see. On the contrary, his cheerfulness appeared to increase, and when he announced that we were only four days, by his reckoning, from Astarnok, his excitement manifested itself. It was not wholly a healthy manifestation. He grew jerky of manner, fell into silences, and came out of them jubilant, all but chuckling. I did not fancy the man in that condition, little as I had fancied him before. I thought this must be the particular way in which the abominable influence of those altitudes and solitudes took him.

On the afternoon of that day, I was walking in Houston's company over a rough piece of ground, with the mules in the rear, when of a sudden I heard a low exclamation from him, and his face staring up at the bluff opposite underwent a deadly change. I followed his gaze, and saw two figures on the skyline of the spur. Houston lifted his rifle with a cry like a wounded animal.

"Stop it, you fool!" I shouted, knocking the barrel up.

The report rang and echoed among the rocks. I swung my service glasses round and directed them across the gully.

"It's a woman, you idiot!" I shouted.

Houston stood quivering, and his face slowly melted back into its fluent, mobile condition. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought it was—I wonder what a woman's doing here."

We should soon know, for the trail they were following was converging toward ours. As I looked, I saw another figure, which also seemed short-skirted, and then the nodding heads of mules. We moved on without a sign, toward the point of convergence, but when some three hundred yards still separated us, I climbed up the slope toward the now obvious female figures. They were both clad suitably for those heights, and each wore blue glasses, which prevented any proper view of their faces. I will confess to a sudden live interest in them, which served to make me realize how deeply, how astonishingly, we were cut off from all that constituted civilization.

"This is a queer place to meet in," I remember I began, hat in hand, and I saw the woman who was in front turn her head aside, and put out her hand to a big boulder near. The other stepped forward, as if to cover the significance of this movement, whatever it might be, and said in English:

"I'm right glad. We were getting pretty lonely. It preys on your nerves, does n't it?"

I answered her, as one would answer a new acquaintance, and we spoke in a friendly way. I was conscious that the other woman had moved away past the boulder, and was giving instructions to the muleteers in the rear. Then she joined her companion.

"How many are you?" she asked, speaking for the first time, in a clear and rather low voice.

I told her we were three in number, and added that we were prospectors. Under this style we had agreed from the first to hide our quest. "My name's Poindexter," I added.

Probably she took it as a challenge, at any rate as an invitation.

"Mine is Varley," she said slowly, "and this is Mrs. Chester."

"You're wondering," said Mrs. Chester, with a laugh, "what brings two unattached women out into this. I've been wondering that a lot myself, and I have come to a conclusion which satisfies me, but not Miss Varley. Do you happen to have any olives?"

I laughed. "Yes, I believe we have," I said.

"Stuffed?" she inquired whimsically.

"Stuffed, I think. My friend Cassilis refuses to travel without them." I indicated Cassilis, who was now quite close.

He lifted his hat. Miss Varley regarded him fixedly through her blue spectacles.

"But we are stopping you," I said. "Let us go down, and we'll find the olives, unless Cassilis has eaten them all. I assume we'll make a common camp to-night."

"Of course," said Mrs. Chester. "Do you know, I was mighty glad when I saw you. What were you shooting at?"

"Oh — a — a condor," I said lamely.

"I hate those creatures." She shuddered. "I can't get accustomed to them. Miss Varley's a good shot; I'm not. The thing kicks so hard."

She leaned on my arm as we descended through the rough stones, and I don't know that she was even aware that she had done so. She rambled on with the unselfconsciousness of a child. I began to like Mrs. Chester, and to wish I could see her face properly. All her features were elusive behind those disfiguring glasses. The two "outfits" commingled, but I could not see Houston. He was somewhere ahead.

"We have always had Manuel to choose our camps for us," said Mrs. Chester.

Houston was shouting in the distance, and as he came back he encountered two of our Indians. Then he marched up, a smile on his burned face.

"This is your — this is your other companion?" inquired Mrs. Chester.

I made the introductions. "Mrs. Chester — Miss Varley — this is Mr. Houston."

There was a moment of absolute stillness on the part of both women. I was conscious of that, though Houston was making a conventional response. Then quite suddenly, Miss Varley took off her glasses and stared at him. I have told you that I have a habit of noticing niceties; her eyes were full, wide and inquiring, as if regarding a specimen under a glass with awakened interest. Mrs. Chester was talking with Cassilis, exchanging, I think, experiences of the soroche. Houston, who had a good deal of manner with women, as he had shown on board, was offering his most engaging social properties. I watched Miss Varley.

Her face was somewhat pallid, and finely moulded, with rather a broad brow, and bold features. Her hair and eyebrows were dark, but her eyes were gray beneath, and very steady and quiet. What struck me most was the latent power of her whole poise. She gave one the impression of reserves. Her body moved easily and with just grace upon its hinges, so to speak. She swept her gaze on me, and there was something from which I winced.

I had never seen a more beautiful woman. That was my impression; and yet, when I took her to pieces afterwards, I wondered why. I had seen faces more vivid, with more regularly handsome features; I had seen greater animation, which so often goes to save an otherwise commonplace appearance; I had seen more color, style and charm in faces. But I had never seen one more striking, never one which

made a pull upon me so deeply with that personal magnetism which is, or may be, individuality, and which is certainly beauty. Mrs. Chester called her, and her face suddenly broke into a smile. That was the last and completing effect. I almost thought I had been waiting for that. At any rate, it achieved the final triumph. The radiance of that smile flashed a charm even upon these barren hills.

"Now you will be able to dine for the first time, Freda," she said, as if indulgently to a younger child.

Mrs. Chester also had stripped off her glasses, and I saw her for what she was, a pretty, vivacious, round-faced blond of thirty, who was engrossing Cassilis's eyes.

"We're botanizing," said Miss Varley to Houston. "I hear you're prospecting."

"I'm not botanizing," interjected Mrs. Chester, who had heard this. "I'm merely the commissariat. Miss Varley is the scientific head of the expedition."

"The word is pretentious," suggested Miss Varley, a faint smile playing on her face.

"I don't think so. Do you, Mr. Cassilis?" said Mrs. Chester, seating herself on a rock, prepared to argue the point. "We've come all the way from New York to explore, and lost a precious season in consequence."

"You like seasons?" asked Cassilis, who hated them, or at least had avoided them, for ten years or more.

She was hesitating, playing him like a finished coquette, I judged; but Miss Varley seemed to think a deeper explanation was required.

"As a matter of fact, the expedition, as Mrs. Chester insists, was equipped by Vassar. You see, this region is one of the few not fully investigated. We considered it a reproach to the United States that it should remain so."

She was looking at me with that curiously disconcerting regard of hers.

"I agree," I said, "but it seems a reproach also to men that it is left for women to —"

"Yes," she nodded, smiling, "that is one of my points. That touches me nearly."

"Mercedes is a suffragist," broke in Mrs. Chester, overhearing. "She is an ardent feminist. I can't soar after her all the way. Even although I've been married —"

"I was in hopes," said Cassilis softly, "that it might have been because of that."

She shot a glance at him. "Yes," she said, with a change of voice and manner. "Yes," very quietly, "perhaps it was because of that."

Though my mind mechanically registered this talk, I was thinking of nothing just then but of a name, Mercedes. It repeated itself in my head, and seemed in a way to flower in that rocky cañon.

Miss Varley turned graciously to Houston, as if to an acknowledged leader.

"I see my men have already settled on the camp. As you have kindly supplied us with olives, perhaps you will also add your company."

Houston's courtesy was executed with almost a flourish. It had just that amount of over-elaboration which settled his social status. But it was easy, and

apparently natural. Was this the man who a few days earlier — We somehow seemed to have “civilized” with this encounter of the sexes. Mrs. Chester was speaking apart with Miss Varley, who listened and shook her head. They both moved across the gully toward the tents which the Indians had already pitched.

“Pretty women — both,” said Houston, with a connoisseur’s air. “Why they will try to spoil their beauty at games like these is a puzzle for gods.”

“The beauty,” said Cassilis, “is still to spoil. Where are my dress clothes, Jack?”

Houston laughed; we were all human again. “I think I’ll take a taxi —” he said in his turn.

Our dinner party was a success; it could not have failed in the circumstances. The ladies had produced from their stores the most tasteful dishes which modern commerce and modern science could pack and procure, and something had been added from our larder. A bottle of whisky was provided for the men, but our hostesses drank from the cold, sweet torrent which swirled along the bottom of the gully. The subjects of our different quests opened up naturally. Houston pressed the question of our companions’ destination.

“Ultimately the Montana,” said Miss Varley, letting her gaze descend the wild scenery, “but,” she added, “there are many points of interest in these upper regions.”

“You propose taking the Fuega Pass?” suggested Houston.

"Yes." She turned to him. "That was what we set out to do; but we may possibly change our plans, get deflected for a time. Anyway, we go north for some days."

"How charming for us!" said Cassilis. "We go north also."

Houston said nothing.

"That will be delightful for us," said Miss Varley, after ever so slight a pause. "We shall feel almost within call of Central Park, sha'n't we, Freda?"

At that word, Mrs. Chester flashed vivaciously into the talk with a chatter of New York. She vowed she was homesick, and Cassilis followed suit. I engaged Miss Varley in conversation, but I had the feeling of some one climbing a fence. She was quite, oh, wonderfully and beautifully civil, but she seemed to have entrenched herself in those reserves of which I have spoken. She picked her way in a talk with both Houston and myself very coolly and in friendly discourse, but I contrasted her with her companion much to her disadvantage. This younger woman was of too austere and cold a nature. She was too much of a piece with those highlands of the Sierra. I felt chilled and unsatisfied. Surely beauty was not designed to be thus placidly exhibited.

Cassilis and Mrs. Chester had run to earth some friends in common in New York, and were talking quite excitedly.

"Molly married, you know. Did n't you hear?"

"No-o; that must have been when I was in Siberia. I don't think I had any letters for many months, and when I did get them I must have missed that."

"But you've been in New York since," protested Mrs. Chester.

"I was there last May, was n't it? But I was only galloping through. I saw few people."

"Ah, you are one of those Americans who regard your country as a prison to escape from."

She spoke reproachfully. Cassilis shook his head.

"No; I regard it rather as a home to return to when one is sick of the wilderness — this, for example." He waved his hand at savage nature.

"Europe is n't like this," objected Mrs. Chester.

"Much worse," he said seriously; "the wilderness there is moral."

Miss Varley, who had lent an ear to this, was eyeing him with interest.

"You think Europe is ethically worse than America?" she asked.

"Not a doubt of it," said Cassilis airily. "Poin-dexter happens to be English, but he is painfully conscious of the moral decadence of his nation. He came here to get away from it."

Miss Varley's gaze rested on my face a moment, though she must have known that he was talking nonsense.

"They say that a course of nature has a beneficial and recuperative effect," she said.

I did not wish to remember at that moment, but her words somehow brought back the horrid pictures. Beneficial! Cassilis and I could have told her better. It bred madness; it made devils; it destroyed the common bonds of humanity by which we were knit together.

So the evening which had opened with pleasant excitement for me was closed in vexation. Nor was this latter feeling limited to that one hour; it recurred. Somehow I was at a disadvantage with Miss Varley. Though I was drawn by her personality more than I cared to realize, I was internally uncomfortable in her presence. She seemed a sort of incarnate conscience, reminding me with her fresh, deliberate eyes how far I had fallen from high standards. For the next two days I had ample time to develop these mixed feelings, for our parties made common progress northward.

It was on the third day that I began to perceive Houston was getting restive. We had now, according to his earlier statements, reached a point from which Astarnok, our goal, was readily accessible. To my calculations, it appeared that the place was but two days distant. Houston was a man, as far as I had judged or could judge, amenable to female influence, and he undoubtedly extracted pleasure from the society of the other sex. I might, indeed, have suspected him of a susceptibility to women if I had gone only by his superficial actions. Yet it was evident that he was embarrassed now by the presence of these two women.

At the end of the second day, toward evening, we descended into a valley which presented more aspects of life than we had hitherto encountered. There were trees in it under the shelter of bluffs and headlands; and wild shrubs grew fairly thickly. I suppose that we had gradually left the distressing elevations of the Cordillera, and were now upon the

more moderate heights of the Sierra. In this comparatively blooming and flowering valley, diversified with trees and the signs of animal life, we pitched the camps.

I remember that there was a flower, a white flower, growing in the valley, and I drew Miss Varley's attention to it. We had gone out together as the sun fell, and there was a beautiful panorama stretched before us. We looked eastward, but the sun was going down behind western boulders. I hated snow, which is a violation of the laws of vision; yet the capped peaks glistened wonderfully in the glow, and the jagged precipices, now seeming remote and out of our lives, looked no longer malignant, but of a great, gray dignity. We stood in silence for some time, for she had ignored, or not noticed, my reference to the flower, and then she spoke almost abruptly.

"You are an Englishman, Mr. Poindexter, who was once in the diplomatic service?"

I was a little astonished. "Yes," I assented, "but no good. I've always been more or less of a failure as things are counted," I added, feeling a strong impulse to honest confession before her.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, looking at me gravely.

"Your people know the difference," I explained, in a rather shamefaced way. "They do things. I never have. I've drifted. I'm a dilettante, an amateur in life."

"And Mr. Cassilis?" she inquired.

"Oh, in a way he does count," I said. "He is

intent on solving the riddle of perpetual motion. He has the epitome of the known world."

"You have known him a long time?" she asked.

"I forget how many years it is since Dick Cassilis and I met in Vienna. We are old comrades."

"Mr. Houston?" she suggested.

"Houston? Well, oh, he happens to be associated with us in this venture — that is all," I said, feeling uncomfortable.

She was silent for a moment, and was looking at the glow on the mountain. I recovered my courage.

"Do you know where that leads?" I asked. "It's the Fuega Pass, Houston says, and beyond is the Montana with its vast forests. Strange, isn't it, that the mountains should divide such contrasts? One is so used also to looking upon the East as the barrens, that the world here seems upside down. A little higher, and you might see, or fancy you saw, the sea, beating on the Peruvian shores. 'By the long wash of Australasian seas.' There is something more impressive in the Pacific than in the Atlantic. Perhaps it is its loneliness. There's nothing yonder for so many, many thousand miles. One wonders what Pizarro thought, when there burst upon him this ocean as he crossed the great range."

She glanced at me, and then looked at the peaks. "I doubt," she said, "if he were alive or sensible to any emotions such as you hint at. I doubt if there was any room in his sordid soul save for gain, for lucre, for gold."

I was silent a moment, for the dart unconsciously barbed had gone home to me once more. I walked

uncomfortably with my conscience when I walked with Miss Varley.

“Yes,” I said at last, “you are right. There was no room for anything but gold in his mind. It is so adventurers inherit the earth, not the meek and lowly and the humble of spirit. Adventurers and those heroes, the merchant princes — the world yields her treasure to these. It is sad, but we cannot remake the universe; and there must be purpose in it.”

Somewhere from behind the scrub of trees which screened the joint camps issued the tinkle of a banjo, and voices raised in song.

Miss Varley smiled. “Is that an answer?” she asked, with a little irony. “Do we live for that?”

“It is a diversion by the way,” I said firmly.

“On the way to what?”

She turned without waiting for an answer, and descended the slopes. The absurd banjo which Cassilis had drawn from the recesses of his baggage twanged on the evening air.

“It is rather pretty in effect,” admitted Miss Varley, as I overtook her. We walked down in silence, listening, and now the gurgling of a stream joined the harmonies of voice and instrument.

“What nonsense is he singing?” asked my companion, smiling.

I could n’t catch the words, but I remembered Kipling, and I quoted:

“‘The tunes that mean so much to you alone —
Common tunes that make you choke and blow your nose,
Vulgar tunes that bring the laugh that brings the groan —
I can rip your very heartstrings out with those.’”

“You do feel like that, too?” she asked suddenly.
“I thought I was foolish. Oh, it’s all nonsense, but — ”

Never had I seen my marble queen touched to such mere human issues. Her pleasure flowed over her in a warm gush. The inane strings of the banjo, heard in that desolate wilderness, had moved her, broken her down.

“I am Memory, I am Torment — I am Town!
I am all that ever went with evening dress!”

Had not the Cordillera perhaps had its play also with this soul, and was it now newly humanized and recovered for emotion?

CHAPTER VII

A PARTING OF THE WAYS

THAT night, I remember, Houston spoke of the pass, and of the Montana beyond. He spoke as if he took it for granted that our ways would now diverge. The pass del Fuego lay at the head of the valley, and was one of the easiest into the back country of the Amazon waters. Miss Varley said very little, beyond putting a question or two, but Mrs. Chester displayed considerable eagerness to learn more of the Montana, and showed also a certain sentiment at the prospect of our parting. I noticed this, and that is why, when we had the surprise next morning, I knew for certain that Miss Varley had made up her mind at the last moment. Mrs. Chester no doubt had been informed in the night, but she had not known when she was talking with us that evening.

Houston it was who gave me the information, brusquely, and accompanied by the nearest approach to uncivil manners I had ever seen in him.

“Did you know that Miss Varley’s decided not to go by the pass? She’s going north. Had you anything to do with it?”

I stared at him. “What should I have to do with that lady’s plans?” I asked slowly. “I’m delighted

to hear we shall have her company a little longer. But will you be good enough to tell me wherein you suppose me to be concerned in her plans? ”

He begged pardon, after a short pause. “It ’s put me out, Poindexter. We ’re just in our last lap, and I guess I ’m on edge a bit. Surely you see we can’t act until these ladies are gone.”

It was true enough, but I don’t think I had realized, till that moment, how little I had been thinking of the Big Fish, and how much of other things.

I made a reluctant assent, qualifying it. “It is not likely that they will delay much longer. I understand that these more fertile valleys have attracted them. The flora is necessarily richer. They will not go beyond the oases.”

“No,” said Houston, “I suppose not,” and he turned away.

There was a succession of valleys on that trail, sheltering a more generous vegetation, and abounding with vicuna and lama and other upland fauna. Houston said nothing after that protest of his, but he seemed to me to have developed, for the first time in my acquaintance with him, a touch of moroseness. He avoided the ladies, and mingled with the Indians, making a business of the readjustment of the packs and of the reorganization of the commissariat.

“It is true that we can supply the larder here,” he told me over his pipe, “but we don’t know how much farther our quest goes. We may be only at the beginning.”

The next night we reached a small ravine, embowered in the Sierras, down which a tumbling tor-

rent brawled through the gulches toward the lower levels of the plains; and here we set up camps. Houston had instructed our Indians to pitch in a grove of trees near the stream, but below this site the valley was broken into rocks and rough places, which made a camp for the ladies inconvenient. Houston suggested a point farther down, under cover of bushes and upon a small ledge which overlooked the water. This, on inspection, both Cassilis and myself pronounced to be an ideal spot, and here accordingly the Indians established the tents.

Houston had picked up towards evening, as though he had outgrown his ungraciousness, and returned to his earlier manner. Indeed, it was his suggestion that Mrs. Chester and Miss Varley should share our supper, which he was at pains to make attractive by delving into our stores. He produced some champagne, of the existence of which I had been unaware. When I said so, he laughed.

“I wanted a few bottles to celebrate the day we should strike it lucky.”

He lifted his tin mug towards the ladies. “Here’s health, mesdames,” and then he looked at me, “and wealth, messieurs.” He grinned and drank.

We followed his example. He had shown a nicety in his choice, health to our visitors, wealth to ourselves. And that was the beginning of his social efforts that night. He used his gift of narrative very prettily, surveyed a good deal of his life, and brought to the surface some interesting stories in a rambling, unpretentious, but effective way. Both Mrs. Chester and Miss Varley listened with evident

interest; and seemed to regret when the entertainment ended.

"You know you've seen a good deal, but you could n't hold an audience like that," whispered Cassilis to me.

"If I had Houston's rich stores to draw on — give me a chance!" I whispered back.

"How much does he leave untold?" murmured Cassilis.

"The shadow of that lies on what he tells," I answered, in the same voice. "Would he hold these ladies were it not for what they suspect?"

"Do you think so?" He sat up. Houston's voice was ending. "Do you know, Jack, I think they suspect us all?"

"What, you too?" I asked dryly.

"You mean Mrs. Chester. I don't know," he said. "I would swear to her genuineness. She is as natural as a kitten. But — but —"

"But she is afraid of you," I interjected brutally.

Cassilis made no answer. The ladies had risen. I do not know what time it was, but the starlight filled the sky, and it was time they were returning to their camp.

Cassilis and I attended them, although the distance was very short. There was the shadow of parting over us all — at least that is what Cassilis and I were feeling. We shepherded the two ladies down to the point where the stream tumbled in a cataract over the ledge, and mounted the small ascent on which the camp had been assembled. Miss Varley and I were in front, and had done with speak-

ing. Something silenced me; perhaps it was my companion's evident distaste for talk. But we could hear Cassilis and Mrs. Chester laughing, behind. I reflected. What I had said was true. For all her gaiety there was some fear, some anxiety at least, in Mrs. Chester's eyes. In the camp there was stillness, for the Indians had settled into the night, and the mules were patiently invisible. I thought I was aware of a shade that flitted among the trees, but it was merely an idle idea. The rumble of the torrent a hundred yards away filled the ears, as an undertone, like the drones of bagpipes.

"Oh, our tent must be over there," Miss Varley intimated, but I only determined what direction she meant by the direction she took. We came to a halt near a spread of canvas.

"Mercedes," called Mrs. Chester, "I thought our tent was here."

"No, this is it," called back Miss Varley, "I was mistaken at first. It's the difference of the dark."

The others joined us, and we stood for a short time in a knot together, previous to speaking.

"A beautiful night," said Mrs. Chester.

"It's pretty cold," said Cassilis; "I should advise you to keep up a good fire."

Instinctively we all looked at the fire, which was sinking low into gray ashes. Nevertheless it lit up a slice of the foreground, the fall of the rock outward, and the gray deeps below.

"I had n't realized we were so near to the edge," said Miss Varley. "Yes, I think we'd better take

your advice about the fire," she added, and stepped forward.

"Let me," I said, and slipped past her to where the pile of fuel was heaped. I seized two logs, and moved towards the fire, Miss Varley at my heels.

Suddenly I was conscious that my feet had gone from the earth, and that I was falling. I fell, clutching. I heard Cassilis call out; and some one screamed.

I was aware now that the log I held was caught over my head, and that I was hanging from it. Cassilis's voice came down to me.

"Holding on, Jack? Wait a bit."

He seized my right arm and pulled. Eased by that relief of weight, I struggled upward, and, floundering, came to land again. Then I wiped the marks of the struggle from my clothes, and began to give attention.

"What was it?" I asked.

Cassilis was peering into a sort of hole. He threw a log on the fire, and, as it blazed, stooped and peered again. I joined him.

"Oh, be careful," called Miss Varley.

Cassilis was muttering something. "A trap, a regular trap," he said. I began to turn over the sticks that he had revealed. In a few minutes it was as clear as daylight, and Cassilis and I ceased our explanation. Miss Varley had joined us.

"I'm afraid your Indians pitched too near the edge," said Cassilis.

"But that's exactly what has been puzzling me,"

said she. "I remember the tent was quite some distance away. I don't understand."

"Wait a moment," I said, and I slipped away, climbed down from the ledge to the lower level, and began an inspection. As far as I could judge, the drop was at this point about fifteen feet, a sufficient fall to imperil the limbs of the unconscious human being who should walk into the trap. But for the billet of wood I carried, I should have gone down into a sort of oubliette. It was constituted by a chasm between the rocks, and had been carefully concealed from view by twigs and grass and leaves. By whom? And with what design? Who had shifted the tent to the margin of the ledge?

I came back with these puzzles in my head.

"Well?" said Miss Varley.

"It would have been a nasty fall, if I had gone all the way," I answered lightly.

"Yes, I suppose so." Was there something dry in her voice?

"It's lucky you had the wood," said Cassilis, as lightly as I.

"Most fortunate," agreed Miss Varley.

I was making an examination of the vicinity and testing the ground about the tent.

"Oh, I think we're all right now," she said, in that curious voice.

I felt awkward. Mrs. Chester gushed very naturally and pleasantly as to her relief that the accident was no worse.

"Well, it's getting late," said Miss Varley. "We must say good night." She was a figure black

against the leaping firelight, and I could not see her face. "I think also it will be good-by. We must start for the Montana to-morrow."

There was a stifled exclamation, hardly that, from Mrs. Chester.

"Thanks so much for all you've done for us," said that little woman nervously, taking her cue. She put out a hand uncertainly, and then half withdrew it. I saw Cassilis capture it. Miss Varley turned to the tent. "Good night," she called.

Our responses followed her lamely into the darkness, and Mrs. Chester extricated her hand and fled, leaving us there. Without a word we departed.

"Jack," said Cassilis presently, in a subdued voice, "that trap was laid."

"Yes," I assented.

"A fall would break a — a person's leg or arm."

"Yes," I said.

"We were there merely by accident," he pursued.

"There would have been an accident, if we had n't been there," I said abruptly.

"Then you see it as I do?" he said, relieved.

"How was it possible to avoid seeing?" I asked.

"And what is more, Miss Varley saw it."

"Does she suspect —" he began.

I groaned. "Oh, the Lord knows what. You remember Coop?"

"I've been trying to forget."

"He was quite stupid with anger this morning when he heard they were going on."

"I think he's mad," said Cassilis.

"There's method in his madness," I replied. "I

thought I saw a shad — Oh, well, we can prove nothing. He has the Indians in hand. We are merely ciphers."

"I begin to think we have been that all along," said Cassilis.

Houston was seated by the fire smoking, when we reached the camp, and looked up on our approach. I could not honestly say he had a guilty look.

"Miss Varley nearly had an accident at her camp," I blurted out.

"Accident!" He withdrew his pipe and stared. "I hope nothing —"

"A plant had been prepared — earth placed over a hole and the trap disguised. If she had fallen through, she would have broken her ankle."

"She did n't, then. I'm glad."

"And she would have been obliged to turn back to civilization," I added, paying no heed.

Houston pulled at his pipe. "I wish she would go back, but I'm glad she did n't hurt herself," he said.

I thought I saw Cassilis's shoulders go up. "Well, they're not going any farther," I said bluntly.

"I'm glad — I'm sincerely glad," said Houston. "That's the best news I've had to-day, Poindexter. Women are well enough in their place, but it must be after the markets. We're out for something more than kisses; kisses are a by-product. And, mark you, it's not certain we're clear of Werner's gang."

He shook his head, filled his pipe again, and talked cheerfully. The man, inhuman as we were

concerning him, was human in that moment to his finger nails. He was almost a model of the genial and affable companion, and we sat talking for half an hour about the route ere we parted. Cassilis lingered with me before retiring. After a silence he said, and it sounded oddly enough:

"She's not afraid of me, Jack."

I gathered his meaning slowly and answered: "It's a rum juncture at which to make that discovery."

"Oh, I could tell, I could tell," he protested, and we were silent again.

"Well, I'm afraid myself," I said at last, "but I don't quite know what of. It seems to me that the curtain's going up again. I think it's Coop."

"I'm not afraid of Coop now," said Cassilis cheerfully.

"Then you can thank heaven your nerves are in a better state than mine," I replied, as I went into the tent.

When I got up next morning, I noticed that Cassilis was absent, and he did not appear until the breakfast was well advanced. Houston made no comment. It was Cassilis who explained.

"Saying good-by," he said easily.

Half an hour later I saw Miss Varley's mules moving. The party were advancing along the bottom, and, turning a corner, were lost to sight almost immediately. Houston had gone, and Cassilis was engaged in some task. I rose and climbed a rise a hundred yards away. Below I could see the outfit, defiling up the valley. We had parted for good, so

to speak, last night — I descended into the open valley and caught them up.

Mrs. Chester hailed me weakly, I thought. Miss Varley bent her head to my salutation.

“I had to come to say good-by, and wish you well,” I got forth stumbingly.

“Has Mr. Houston come, too?” she asked, looking toward the ridge.

I flushed. “No. I know nothing about him,” I said sharply. “I only answer for myself. I wanted to say good-by.”

“I fancy it was time we did,” she said slowly. “We have wasted too much time already.”

Her words were innocuous in themselves, but I seemed to read something into them.

“The meaning of the word is God be with you, Miss Varley,” I said, looking her straight in the face.

“Yes,” she nodded. “We will leave it at that, then — neither of us could better it. Good-by, Mr. Poindexter — that is, God be with you.”

She turned away, and she had not offered her hand. Mrs. Chester, as she went, gave me a frightened glance. I stood, my heart sunk in a sudden wretchedness, and watched the procession pass. It passed and faded among the broken vegetation of the valley.

I was conscious at the last of that frightened glance, and, as I walked back, mortified and gloomy, I wondered what was the significance. Was it really fear it held; or was it appeal or deprecation?

CHAPTER VIII

THE CLIFF

THAT day we left the comparatively opulent life of the valley and moved again across the naked Sierra. Houston was in amazing spirits, laughing and talking, and rendering himself agreeable, and as active as a bee in all the business of the advance. As he drew nearer to the goal for which we had striven so long and so terribly, he displayed himself at his best. That night he told us that we were within thirty-six hours of Astarnok.

“You may take it at that,” he said, “though I’m not sure to a point or two. The fact is, I shall have to lay a course, in nautical phrase.”

“Have you been there?” asked Cassilis.

“Within a short distance of it,” he replied, fingering his beard. “It’s not what you understand by a village — in fact, it’s a station of the dead. It was once inhabited, but is now deserted — long since. No; there was never anything to draw a man there, no prospect of reefs, nothing. That is why Raymond hid his secret there, no doubt.”

It was, of course, impossible to resist the contagion of the fever. Despite what we knew, what we thought we knew, and what we guessed, Cassilis and

I were inflamed by talk like this. The secret of the Incas' treasure lay within thirty-six hours of us!

"To-morrow," said Houston, still fingering his beard, "I shall have to trig a course, to make sure. There are so many valleys and gulches here. We might miss this one a hundred times. If I can figure out one I know, I can find the temple at Astarnok."

"The temple!" I echoed.

"Yes, it's Inca work — some say pre-Inca work — Chimu. But it's never been explored or excavated." He thumped his side suddenly. "By God, if it should be there! But no, it would be too obvious. Raymond would n't —"

He sank into ruminating silence, in which there seemed even a touch of moodiness.

Some time after noon on the following day, we had reached a level among the crags which Houston declared suitable for his observations. It was a wild scene, the barren grandeur of which affected one's nerves. So far as the eye could see northward, cap beyond cap of the Cordillera pierced the heaven; long ranges, all white, ribbed the horizon, intricately confused. Southward, a great precipice cut us off from the more gracious country of the valleys; and our immediate surroundings displayed the work of frost and snow at those elevations. The earth was destitute of any growing thing, and strewn with boulders, as after some huge blasting operation of Nature. The sun beat upon us hot as in the tropics, and we had cast off our coats to walk. We took food in an eyrie on the heights and surveyed the prospect.

"It's yonder," said Houston, indicating merely

distance. "But which of the gullies I don't know, and sha'n't until I've trigged the place. I shall want the help of both of you."

Neither Cassilis nor I had more than a rudimentary acquaintance with the science which thus mapped out continents and measured mountains. But we were willing, even eager, to assist.

"I'll call on you when the preliminary preparations are made," said Houston. "The Indians can do those things. Afterwards they will be no use."

Cassilis and I sat and eased our limbs, and talked and smoked for some time, and presently Houston returned.

"Cassilis, will you go with Diego?" he said. "Across the gully, and up the hill yonder. I'll join you afterwards. We've got to fix up a base line."

When the others had gone, Houston turned to me. "Now we can get to work," he said, showing his even teeth in a curious smile. His eyes were narrowed to points in deep sockets. "Can you use a theodolite?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Never mind. I'll manage without that if you only follow instructions carefully. I've put up one side of the base beyond there. I want to triangulate with the hill on which Cassilis is."

It was all double Dutch to me, but I accepted it on faith, and obeyed like a schoolboy. Houston took some instrument from his pocket, adjusted it on a tripod, and squinted along it. He shook his head. "Not far enough back," he said, while I watched him with interest. "I'll get the angle directly."

We picked our way among the rocks to a point where the ridge sloped outward, and once more he set up his instrument. Still he seemed discontented. I looked to the hill beyond, and I thought I could see some of the pack mules winding along its side.

"Wait a bit," said Houston, as if sudden inspiration had come to him. "Do you see that rock? Pace beyond it, counting as you go, until I call stop."

I walked to the rock. "Now?" I asked.

"Yes. Count!" came Houston's voice clearly to me.

I walked forward and counted. I was aware that I was reaching the edge of a cliff but I could not see beyond. It did not seem as if I could walk very many yards farther in safety. Twenty — twenty-one — twenty-two — I counted. The rock hid me from Houston — and then I fell.

The whole earth shifted under me, and I went down. As I did so, there flashed into my mind the fall in front of Miss Varley's tent; but the thought was only instantaneous, for I remembered nothing after that.

I conjectured afterward that I had been struck by one of the huge stones which the dislodgment of the cliff had brought down with me. At any rate, I must have been stunned and remained unconscious for some time. The sun was shining brightly when I opened my eyes, and slowly took in my position. I had fallen some thirty feet, but the fall had been broken by the débris among which I lay. The slope of the cliff was steep, but not perpendicular. It was composed of loose rubble and stones, and on the

first movement I made I began to go down with it. I clutched heavily at the treacherous cliff, and slowly my downward movement ceased. I began to examine my position carefully. I saw now that I was in immediate danger, if the loose stones were disturbed, of going down a chute into the depth below. I had no means of seeing what lay in that depth, because I could not wheel my eyes downward beyond a certain projecting ledge some hundred feet lower. If I reached that ledge, and it held, I might have a chance. I saw no other. I glanced upward, for I was able to do that better the way I lay, and I saw overhead a number of menacing boulders. The cliff was alive with eyes watching me and threatening doom. I feared the fierce onslaught of those huge crags, which appeared to rest on the soil with no roots, and lean towards me. Again my eyes went down as far as their range. The ledge outstanding, yet not in a direct line, invited them. Below and beyond, I vaguely guessed at an empty chasm, from which there was a dull roaring. Was it a torrent from the glaciers higher up? I had lost my sense of direction, and knew nothing. The sun blazed like an instrument of torture.

I don't know what started the idea in my mind unless it was the quickened senses under the inspiration of peril. I suddenly thought of homeopathy. The idea in that juxtaposition sounds ridiculous. It was ridiculous, but life is ridiculous, and, if we have a sense of humor, death also. At any rate, the idea of homeopathy entered my mind, dribbling in, as I stared at the hot sky.

“Small doses!” I repeated it to myself. “Small doses of the poison.”

That was the secret. If I struggled I should fall in a shower of débris that would amount to a small landslip. But let me wriggle!

I wriggled. I felt the earth and stones move round me. In a sort of moving matrix I was shepherded downward one yard, two yards — I came to a pause.

Surely now I had the secret. Yes; it was homeopathy. I wriggled again, and the pebbles escorted me a yard or two lower. A third time I repeated the manœuvre, and this time one of the larger rocks joined morosely in the movement, and, rolling into the vacuum I had made, struck my head.

For some minutes — I know not how many — I was still, dumb, incapable of motion; merely aware of the hot sun. Then I recovered, took a grip of my courage and wits, and moved again.

It would be wearisome to take you through that terrible downward course. At one point (whether I had moved with too much energy, or the stones were loose, I don't know), I descended with a rush for a dozen feet or more, and was only held up by a protruding rock more deeply imbedded than usual. When I got back my breath I hardly dared stir, but by degrees I regained confidence, and advanced once more. It must have been fully two hours ere I reached the ledge.

It was an insecure resting-place after all, but I was now able to look down and see what lay beyond it. There was an abrupt fall of some two hundred

feet, and then a fierce torrent swirling at the base of the cliff. Sick at heart after all my exertions, I found my position even worse than it had been originally. The ledge absolutely overhung the precipice, and I seemed to have arrived at a deadlock. I lay on my side sweating with my exertions, and looked out from my eyrie as if it were an eagle's, upon the rocky plain below.

The heat of the sun, though now far gone in its declension, affected me in my weakened state of nerves and muscles. I dozed. When I awoke there was something in the plain below, which made me sit up and stare.

It was some one riding on a mule — no, there were two people. They drew nearer, and halted as if uncertain of their direction, some half a mile away. At first I took them to be two of our party, and then I saw I was wrong, for while one was plainly an Indian, the other was unmistakably a woman. I rose on my ledge and cried aloud. I shouted, and I gesticulated. The woman started her mule up the bed of the river, and the Indian followed. I redoubled my efforts, and I thought I saw the Indian's face turn in my direction. The mules stopped, and it seemed as if a consultation was in progress. Then the mules were pulled around, and came slowly toward the torrent. I was still waving my hands wildly. Again they stopped, and again they went on, but this time the halt seemed to have been to consider a plan of campaign. I lost sight of them behind a bluff.

It may have been an hour later, when I had given

up all hope, that I heard some one calling to me, away on the right. Some bushes here joined with the rough ground to make a sort of low wall thirty yards away. The face of an Indian was peering through, and he was shouting words I could not make out. Then there was a silence, and suddenly he appeared again, busy with something; he moved to the edge of the firm rock, and whirled a rope about his head. I understood — it was a lariat.

The rope swung, twisting lightly, easily, as a thing alive in the sunlight, and fell with unerring accuracy on the ledge at my feet. I thanked God and the Indian for that trick of the plains. But what did it there in exhibition among the empty mountains of Peru? I dismissed the vague wonder, and eagerly grasped the hitch of the rope, passing it over my head and under my arms. The Indian nodded, and began to pull.

I reached safety amid a constant stream and rush of débris, bruised, torn, and breathless, but unbroken; and beyond the scrub I came face to face with Miss Varley.

“You are not hurt?” she asked quickly, and without salutation, and upon my reply in the negative, added: “It looked an ugly situation.”

“It was,” I said, “and I owe you my grateful thanks for the rescue.”

“I don’t know that we can talk about it in such heroic terms,” said Miss Varley, and unexpectedly appended: “There is something else. I have something to say to you.”

“Won’t you sit?” I asked, looking at the rocks,

and with a somewhat ridiculous assumption of drawing-room manners. I was not conscious of my tattered garments, nor was she. I wondered at her face, and was wondering when she spoke. Why was she here, miles away from the pass into the Montana?

"Three of my Indians have come back from Arequipa," she began abruptly.

I took this in, but it did n't, at first, at any rate, seem significant. She continued as abruptly:

"I sent them down some time ago for supplies and — other things. They returned last night."

As she paused, I interjected a vague commonplace. She had the appearance of one preoccupied with distress.

"It's wonderful how these native Indians do find their way about," was what I said.

I don't know that she heard. She spoke in a level and rather hard voice, and looked at the glittering valley. "About a week ago I came upon a dying man. He had been shot and left for dead. It was in the range back yonder."

I was listening now, with both ears straining, and with a heart that beat rather fast.

"When he revived under the influence of a little brandy, I heard a tale from him. It was plain he was far gone, and I doubted if he would ever travel a day's journey. Yet that was the only chance, and he begged for it — to be sent down to Arequipa. So I sent him — under the care of the three Indians — those who returned last night."

I understood. It was Coop! Coop in life or in death was bound about my neck like a millstone.

"You came to tell me this?" I said after a silence.

"I thought you could make your own deductions," she said coldly.

"Please let me understand," I persisted. "Why is it necessary that I should know that the three Indians returned last night?"

Something flashed in her face, and then a baffled look succeeded. "We had pitched camp in a gully on the Sierra," she said, in a monotonous voice, "and later I wandered out and explored. There was a moon, and it showed me men on mules busy in a fold of the rocks below. I went nearer, and saw them — the face of one quite clearly. They were armed, and I didn't reveal myself. I don't know, but I thought they were perhaps on some unholy errand. There was a tent. The moon shone on it. I saw the men go in, and the one whose face I saw came out last, and lifted his gun and strode off after the others. When they were gone I descended carefully to the tent, and looked in. There was a man dying there, a man with a bullet wound left for dead."

Coop! Cassilis had been right. Never would the shadow of Coop lift from our lives then.

"And the man whose face you saw?" I said hoarsely.

She turned away and said nothing. "Why do you tell me this?" I asked angrily. "Is it merely sport or justice?"

"It is neither," she said. "I don't know why. It is perhaps because I am not certain. I don't know."

"You thought that the man was killed by us?" I demanded.

"I had every reason to think so," she replied. "He told me his tale."

A dozen emotions and thoughts were stirring me. This, then, was the explanation of Coop's disappearance. It did not lie at Houston's door at all. How far had that cowardice, that inaction, that abstention of Cassilis and myself, been responsible for the tragedy? I dared not attempt to clear myself. I stood silent; and then sense woke in me again.

"You want me to defend myself?" I asked defiantly.

"I never thought of that. What defence is there? No; I think I was merely influenced by a desire for fair play. Even the criminal should have his chances. That is why I told you about the Indians."

"I do not understand," I said dully. "What have I to do with the Indians? The man's dead and —"

"The man reached Arequipa safely," she interposed. "He had told me his story, and why you were wanted. He wished to go back and inform the authorities. He wanted to do his duty before he died."

I stared. "What story did he tell you?" I asked, in a quiet voice.

She did not hesitate; she seemed now to have made up her mind to go through with it. "Of your offence against the law, of his pursuit, and of your — your vengeance on him. He was resolved to put the law on your track, if he should live."

She shifted her gaze to me. "That is why I thought you ought to know."

"I wonder," I said steadily, regarding her, "I wonder just how much you meant to extend the quality of mercy to the criminal. You told me that I ought to know — but what? I know from you that this man, Coop, was conducted by your servants to Arequipa. Is that the extent of my knowledge?"

I could not help the hardness of my voice. It seemed once more as if we were engaged in a battle to the death with Coop. I felt all the old fierce feelings, the joy of fight rising with resistance, the callousness in the face of suffering. Coop had threatened us in his death. He threatened us again in his resurrection. Coop!

"What am I to know?" I demanded.

"The man, Coop, as you call him, has communicated with the authorities," she said. "There is an armed expedition sent after you."

I could have burst into laughter in her face; so amazing was the irony of it all. We had feared Coop, but Coop dead, the spirit of Coop brooding malevolently over those who left him to die in the wilderness. We had never for a moment thought of this, of Coop alive, Coop twisting on his sick-bed in his obdurate, tricky, cockney way, to play the cards against us. The authorities! An armed expedition! I could have shouted with laughter.

"Thank you," was all I said. "Now we know where we are. You have consented to give us then a sporting chance, so to speak."

"I don't understand terms of that sort," she re-

plied coldly. "I came to the conclusion that you ought to know."

I wondered why. And then, revolving in my mind all the circumstances of the case — what she had seen, her natural suspicions, what she had heard to confirm these — I felt of a sudden that I was doing her an injustice in that hour of bitter chagrin.

"You are very kind," I said earnestly. "I am doubly in your debt. You saved my life just now on the cliff side. You would now save my — my name."

"Your life!" she echoed, looking startled.

"Yes; did n't you know that?" I asked. "Nothing could have saved me, if it had n't been for the lariat. I wonder where that man of yours got his knowledge of it. The Indians here are not accustomed to make use of the lasso."

She did not answer that, but asked: "How was it you were on the cliff?"

I looked upward towards the hill in the fading light. Problems began to crowd upon me. I did not expect to see Houston's face peering over the mountainside, alert, cruel, dominant. I had dismissed Houston from my mind from the first moment of my recovery. But now he came back, an obtrusive figure, and I knew he could not be so dismissed.

"You remember that unstable piece of ground by your tent?" I asked slowly.

"Yes," she nodded, and our eyes met. "You knew?"

"I think I did. I guessed, at any rate. Well, to

think that the trick could be repeated on me! Upon my soul, I deserved all I got."

"Repeated! What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

I threw my hand upward. "A queasy piece of earth, rotten, undermined. A wink is as good as a nod, don't they say?"

She drew a long breath. "You mean it was undermined, prepared — like, like —"

"Yes," I assented. "We are having open confession to-day."

"But that man — what did he want — why should he — ?"

She broke off.

"He has his reasons," I said. "Reasons which applied to you, too. I think he only meant you to injure yourself superficially — a broken arm —"

She laughed scornfully. "And you?" she said finally.

"That is another matter," I said, and there was silence. Suddenly I added: "There is Cassilis."

"Yes, yes," she said in distress. "What is to be done?"

CHAPTER IX

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE STARLIGHT

IT was darkening toward evening, and as yet I knew nothing of her own personal situation. My own, and its relation to her, had absorbed all our interest.

"You ask what is to be done," I said, "when all is done." It was brutal. But I was a mere barbarian just then.

"No," she answered more quietly. "You are between two fires, but everything is not over. You are in danger from the authorities, and also from this man Houston. The question is, which is the greater peril?"

"You take an interest in our peril?" I murmured.

"I should n't be here if I did n't," she said bitterly. "I am a fool for my pains."

"You can be sorry and yet have no faith. It's good of you," I said. "Only a woman could be so generous. You think us guilty and yet would help us."

"Not — not that man," she cried.

"Then," I said triumphantly, "you have doubts as to our guilt."

She shook her head. "I wish I could."

"You have," I declared eagerly. "And you are justified. Coop lied, whatever story he told you. We are not malefactors, and he has no authority to represent the law."

"But he was wounded — and was left —"

She was looking at me, and my eyes fell. "He was wounded in fair fight. He forced it on us, nor was it Cassilis or I who wounded him."

"I knew *that!*" she cried.

"Yes, but there is worse," I said in shame. "When you saw us, we were searching for him. He had been our antagonist, a troublesome antagonist. He had no right where he was, tracking us. We are — are prospectors, you see, and we have — think we have a rich find. This man pursued us. He had no right. There is no law runs in this wilderness save that of might."

"Yes, yes, I understand," she said eagerly.

"We found him ill, wounded. We left him."

There was a silence, in which I was conscious of the flood of water roaring below. I broke it at last.

"It is no use that we repented, Cassilis and I, and came back in the night — but he was gone."

"Yes," she breathed deeply. "We had found him," and she added, as if to herself: "You came back."

I stirred. "Now you must let me put you on your way, as night is coming on."

"You must come back with me to the camp," she said hurriedly. "Manuel knows the way. You can't go back to Houston."

"I must go back to Cassilis," I said.

"Cassilis — yes. Freda —" she was silent.

"Does Mrs. Chester know all this?" I asked.

"Freda knows everything, but she did n't believe — at least not after — she does n't believe now."

"And you?" I asked gently.

"I suppose I have never been tempted," she said slowly. "But I think I could understand later. If I was wrong and mistaken in one thing, I may be mistaken in another. I am not hard, only ignorant."

"You are divinely merciful," I said.

"I have betrayed you to Coop and your enemies," she said, with a sudden wildness. "They will be upon you. You must come back with me."

I shook my head, smiling. "You know I can't."

"No, you can't. There's your friend. If it should be too late! Why does the man, Houston — Is he afraid of you as he was of Coop?"

"Some day I will tell you. I must find Cassilis now. I must see you on your way. Where is your camp?"

"You need n't trouble about me. I have Manuel. I'm not afraid."

"I never thought you were. I can't conceive of you afraid."

"Can't you? I can. I have been. I am in dreams."

"Dreams, ah! We are not responsible for dreams. Miss Varley, I am deeply grateful to you. And, though you may not think it, I value your good will very much. I should like you to have as good

an opinion of me as you can. Believe me, I'm not a malefactor. You know the worst."

"You have said that law does not run in the wilderness. Does that apply also to ethics?"

"I wonder what would you or I become if left to the mercies of the wilderness for years?"

"I am no one's judge," she said. "For Heaven's sake don't think me a prig."

"I think you goodness itself. Good-by."

I held out my hand. The shades of the evening were falling, and I had work. Should I ever see her again? She had never touched my hand. Now she did so and sent a glow through me.

"Thank you," I said, turning. "And now for Cassilis!"

Mine was the upward road across that accursed hill, and I paused once or twice to watch her go — till she passed out of sight towards the valley. By the time I had scaled the height, night was imminent. The cold was intense; the stars shone; I saw bleak peaks in heaven. Somewhere across the next ravine of rocks Cassilis had departed with Diego. I recalled how I had seen the mules winding about the spur. I descended into the chasm, and the darkness closed in on me. I had no definite plan in my head. My only idea was that I must warn Cassilis of Houston's treachery. I understood some of the springs of that scoundrel's actions, though I had forbore to lay bare the workings to Miss Varley. He had no further use for us. He had secured the knowledge of Raymond's secret through us, and perforce had taken us in as partners and associates.

That silenced us, and prevented a hostile and rival expedition. Now he was so close upon his treasure that there was no need for ceremony with us; we had become mere incumbrances, whom it were well to drop casually. I could not doubt that he had his Indians bound to him, and I distrusted Diego, the mestizo, in particular, for a consummate villain. It was he whom I suspected of the trap before Miss Varley's tent.

When I reached the summit of the farther hill, I walked wrapped in night, but able to discern the upstanding rocks. Here there was no movement or sign of life, and only a gurgling noise witnessed to the fall of a small stream among the rocks. I proceeded beside this downward toward the bottom for some time, and, walking under its cover, so to speak, I made no audible sound on the stones. Presently I came abruptly to a stop, for the faint starlight showed me something moving not far away. I became as still and stationary as the rocks about me, and watched.

So far as I could make out, it was a man busy with a pile of stones, but it was long before I was able to determine what he was doing. Then at last I noticed that the heap was diminishing. As he went on he flung stone after stone aside, and then he would peer down on the heap, and next throw more stones away and peer again. Seeing the man so absorbed in his work, and knowing that the water drowned the sound of my footsteps, I approached nearer and strove to solve the riddle. The man was working furiously, and something in his

gestures seemed familiar. I passed in mental review, Houston, dismissed him, and was pulled up at the thought of Diego. I had guessed the identity beyond a doubt. It was the mestizo who was at work in this odd, furtive manner under the stars.

And then, coming from I know not what source, a horrible fear rose in me. Those stones! I knew them. They formed a cairn — a tumulus. Was treasure underneath? No; there was . . .

Suddenly Diego paused in his work, and backed away. Then a horrid scream of fear rent the air about me, and he began to run wildly away. I loosened my revolver, which I still retained, and moved forward. Out of the débris of the stones something rose, something dark, mysterious, and unrecognizable. Was it an animal? My heart beat hard as I gazed. Then, in the faint light, the thing detached itself from the shadows and the darkness, and became individual. It crept and staggered, but (My God!), I knew it . . . !

“Cassilis!” I shouted, but I don’t know that my voice carried far. I was vaguely conscious that it was weak and thin, like a reed squeaking in my throat. Well, at any rate, I had the use of my limbs. Diego was flying furiously, a black and dwindling shadow; I ran forward.

“Cassilis!” I cried. The stumbling figure seemed to turn its head, and then to gather speed and run at an incredible pace for one so crouched and doubled. It ran along the rocky margin of the torrent.

“Cassilis!” I cried, pursuing it. My God! Cassilis arisen from that tomb among the rocks!

I ran blunderingly, but the poor thing in front of me sped the faster, as if terror were at its elbow. The torrent roared and swallowed my voice. I was gaining nothing, yes, something, a little, on that stricken creature. It vanished ahead. And then the hill ceased, and there was a precipice below me.

I came to a pause on the brink of the gulf. The torrent roared and spouted as it pitched itself into the void down to some unplumbed depths below. Had Cassilis gone over? Had that thing which had seemed Cassilis, a blighted, broken, frightened thing, stumbled over and gone headlong downward? I shuddered and turned back. I was drawn to that mysterious stack of stones higher up. Reaching it, I made an examination of the ground, and fumbled among the rocks nervously. I was afraid, I think, of what I should find there. I turned over a stone larger than others, and by the light of my electric torch I scrutinized it. I recoiled from the stain upon it, and stood up. My God! I knew. I saw all now. This then had been the fate destined for Cassilis. He had been shot or stabbed and buried under a cairn. But what was Diego doing there? What was the meaning of his stealthy, nocturnal mission to the place where the dead had been laid? Dead! It came to me swiftly and with a fresh access of terrified wonder. He had not been dead. That thing I had seen staggering, loping, flying for life, had been a maimed and wounded man, but not a dead man. From the tomb the dead had risen and scared the vulture at his work!

I turned back again. I must find out what had

happened to Cassilis. I must descend the rocks into the valley where the water fell. It was a precipitous way, and I struggled down among the boulders, supporting myself by them, until I reached the bottom. The drop was, as near as I could estimate, forty feet, and the mass of water came over with a mighty roar. It spread in a pool below, and thence rushed down into a bigger volume of water which drained the gully at that part. There was only the starlight to assist me, for my small torch was only of use in detail, and I experienced some difficulty in searching the banks. I was conscious, moreover, with a sickly feeling in my heart, that no one could have fallen into that waterslide and lived. I made search as far as the junction of the torrent with the more spacious, easier-flowing stream, but I saw no sign of anybody. It was probable that anything tossed by the torrent into the smoother and deeper flood would have been swept away long since into the valleys below.

I came back with all hope gone, yet reluctant to leave the scene. It seemed so terrible a way in which to part from a friend one had left straight, tall, and stalwart a few hours earlier — that he should have gone to his doom, a stricken creature, flying in panic from the very man who would have stood by him to the end. A gulp came into my throat — and then my heart leaped in exultation. At the distance of a hundred yards or so was a man's figure detaching itself weakly from the darkness. I moved towards it with a cry of welcome.

The next moment I had stayed my steps. This was not Cassilis, but another. The figure advanced towards me quickly, and now I saw that it was not an Indian, but a white man, and that it was not Houston. I waited his approach in expectancy.

"Can't wish you good day very well," he said, when he reached me, "and good night's out, too. We'll rest content with 'Howdy.' Who are you, anyway?"

He was peering into my face as he spoke, more nearly than civil usages seemed to permit; and thus I got a good sight of him. The stranger was a man somewhat over middle height, of a dark, flat face with inconspicuous features, and the general impression I got was repellant.

"I'm a mining prospector. Who are you?" I asked bluntly, in my turn.

"Ditto to you," he answered, with a laugh. "But you answer to a name, don't you? Mine's O'Rourke."

I responded: "Mine's Poindexter."

"Got you," he said suddenly, and clapped a pistol to my forehead. "Better go easy, man. It's a hair trigger." He whistled, and swore, for the noise of the water drowned out his whistle. "Step lively," he adjured, "this is all-fired cold, and I've been out for days, it seems."

I made no movement, nor was I foolish enough to let my hands go down to my pockets.

"Who are you, and by what right do you hold me up?" I asked.

"By right of this," he said, jogging the cold

barrel against my face. "Damn your rights. Come along."

There was a sharp report at the back of my head, which made me start, and he laughed uproariously as at a good joke.

"Smarted you, hey? I've worked that trick before."

From the acrid smell of powder I gathered that he had let off another pistol in his other hand, by way of challenge, intimidation, or signal. It proved to be the latter, for I suddenly perceived a second figure running out of the night toward us. I had had time already to sum up the situation, and to make a guess at what had happened.

The second man arrived on the scene, and addressed the other with a high-pitched voice, which I seemed to recognize.

"Bagged him, Jeff?" he said exultantly. "I reckon that gives us the cinch." He came up to me, and seized an arm. "It's no use you making any kick, young man," he said. "You're as good as dead if you do. Haul him along, Jeff."

It certainly seemed that with a loaded revolver menacing me, and two stalwart ruffians by my side, discretion was the wiser counsel. I signified my intention to follow, if they would release me.

"The cards are against me," I said, "though I'm hanged if I know what it all means. Unless you're actually going to commit me to sudden death, I'll come along quietly. I'm a bit played out to-night."

The man Jeff's hand went into my pocket and

extracted my revolver. "All right," he said, "you can ease up, Maddock."

Maddock was something familiar in my ears, along with his voice, and I said so mildly.

"I fancy I must have had the pleasure of making Mr. Maddock's acquaintance at some time. Was it in Timbuctoo? Or maybe Tokio? It seems worlds away, anyway. And we renew it under strange circumstances. Fate is odd."

"Fate will be damned odder if I use my butt on your teeth," responded Maddock ill-temperedly.

O'Rourke laughed. "Oh, he's good enough for you, Maddock," he said. "He's prime fed and fattened. I like a deal with that sort; and so, I reckon, will Werner."

Of course I had known it almost from the first. These were members of Werner's gang, the Black Gang, as Houston had called them, whom Coop had put on the track of our expedition. I said no more, but was busy with sundry speculations during the progress of the next twenty minutes. You see, for one thing, I had undergone a mental revolution; I did not know now quite where I stood; my world was topsy-turvy.

Behind a bluff in the hills a welcome fire glowed and sparkled. I was dead weary, and I remembered that I had had no food since midday, since which time I had passed through some curious experiences.

"I hope," said I, as we reached the camp, "that this will prove as comfortable as it looks, for I have a hearty appetite."

Jeff guffawed, and the miserable Maddock whined

and jangled out something to my detriment and to the disadvantage of my future disposal. But it was plain these were not the master hands, and I awaited Werner with some curiosity. This was soon assuaged, for as we came up, the flap of a tent lifted, and a thick, square form stood in the entrance.

"It 's Poindexter, is n't it?" he called out.

"Right enough," said Jeff, expectorating. "An easy cop."

"I thought it would be," said the other. "I 'm glad. We 'll make him welcome. You remember me, Poindexter? How are you?"

"Rather tired and very hungry," I replied.

He stared at me. "I hope we 'll do a deal this time," he said. "Jeff, let them fetch food here. I could do with a snack myself."

He entered the tent, and emerged with something in his hand. The fire was leaping among the brush-wood Jeff had thrown on.

"Will you give me your parole?" asked Werner.

"I will for the next hour," I said.

I caught flashes of his face in the firelight, and it was sardonically amused. "All right; we can afford that," he said. "Drink?"

I saw he had a bottle and a glass in his hands, and I assented. I drank a long-drawn draught of weak whisky and cold mountain water, and I felt better.

"We have n't got much of that," said Werner, seating himself. "That 's your fault, Poindexter. If we had n't had to scurry from London —"

"I thought you had plenty of time," I interposed, shooting at random.

The light was red on his full, dark face, and he scowled.

"That's Houston's lip," he said. "My God, when I get my fingers on him! If he has n't slipped us — it was the nearest thing."

"By the way, how's my friend Coop?" I asked politely, setting to work on the food some one had brought.

Werner grinned. "Coop ought to interest you," he said. "Coop is a nut. I would n't lose Coop for a diamond fortune. Well, Coop's in hospital, doing well, thank you."

"I'm glad of that," I said. "He was a very entertaining type. Like you, I should feel his loss."

Werner was examining me without emotion, stolidly, almost lymphatically, and his jaws moved slowly on the food.

"There's just one question I'd like to put," he said at last. "Did you know anything of Raymond's lacquer box when you bought it?"

"I haven't any objection to answer that," I replied. "I had n't the least knowledge of it."

"I thought so from the first." He nodded, and a scowl captured his face till it was a mere mask of morose and malign fury. "Some day you and I will have a talk about your Mr. Houston. Meanwhile we've got something more important to talk of; and as there's no time to lose, better get on with your refreshment. An hour, you said? Yes, I'll give you the hour. Sit here and think. I don't quite know what's at the end of the hour, nor do you, I guess."

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And as he spoke, he rose like a quadrilateral figure, and waddled away, grotesquely. Yet there was something impressive behind that grotesqueness; and, in spite of all the new ideas forming in my head, and the new recklessness of fate that I challenged, there was a strangely uneasy feeling in my heart.

CHAPTER X

THE RIGHT BOWER

THAT night stands out in my memories in vivid particularity. I could not guess the hour nearer than midnight, though it may have been short of that by some time. I seemed to have lost count in the press of my strange adventures that evening. It was a fine, light night, as I think I have said. The camp lay in the trough of a valley which had been the ancient bed of a river, and was hemmed about with rising spurs naked as the Sahara, and round about these again, but at a greater distance, loomed the higher peaks of the Andes. The hollow in which we were was filled with cactus, and a shrubby growth of what sort I could not determine in the darkness, and the play of the flames threw shadows over all, —leaping shadows that blotted out the brushwood behind, and the tents near it.

From the time Werner came back and sat down with his face to the fire, I had a consciousness that I was playing a hand in a game. Of course I knew what he wanted, but I did n't quite know yet how I felt about it. I had no passion of hatred for him, as I had for Houston, but I was in the position,

if you consider, of one brought to bay by a pack of his natural enemies. That was how I regarded them. They were all vermin together, and I distasted them. I did not know what I should say as I sat there with my back against a rock and looked at Werner's broad, sardonic face. I was watching how he would play his hand.

"You know what I want, Poindexter," he said clearly. "I want Houston's trail."

"I supposed so," I replied. "I can't give it to you."

"No, sonny, not just now, I know," he said easily. "I was prepared for that. But I've got to have it to-night, and so we'd better get along with our pow-wow. Any little natural reluctance or shyness about it you'll get over in time; only don't make it too long. Don't be too coy, Poindexter, or I'll have to take charge. What time did Houston reckon to reach — well, what he was aiming at?"

"If I remember rightly, he said we were two days off what you mean," I said deliberately.

"Ah! Then that leaves a small margin," said Werner sharply. "Is Miguel there, Jeff? Tell him to get those mules ready."

His cool assumption that he would get what he wanted out of me ruffled me. Jeff, lean and hard-bitten, with his insignificant face, stood watching at the entrance of a tent. He smoked in a leisurely manner; it was obvious that he left the playing of this game to his leader with confidence. I suddenly determined what game it was; it was euchre. I don't know why I imaged it thus, but I did. Werner

had led, and appeared to have taken his trick. I waited for him to go on.

"I'm going to make it easy for you," he said, in his assured way. "I don't mind using blank cartridge, if it will do. There's no need to make a mess. We've got room for you somewhere."

"You are very generous," I said sarcastically.

"I don't know," said Werner, looking at me, "that there's much of that about. It's only that I don't want more trouble than is needful. I believe in short cuts."

"Then cut it short," I advised.

"You have an arrangement with Houston," he proceeded. "You can transfer it to this shop if you like, subject to rebates."

"Will you explain?" I asked.

I was looking beyond him across the fire which was leaping and obscuring the scrub near one of the tents. In that obscurity there seemed to be some movement; it seemed somehow pregnant with suggestion.

"We hold your party in an adverse position," went on Werner. "For one thing, we're on the tail of you, and for another we've got you under lock and key. So we are in a position to make terms. As a short cut, I'm willing to let you in, but not on bedrock prices. You shall have your share. If you accept that, we'll call it a deal, and arrange details. I'd sooner do it without a mess."

"What mess?" I asked.

I saw a star behind a peak on the Andes, and the sky was as blue as the sea in contrast with those

leaping flames. Still the shadows jumped grotesquely about the tent in the scrub; it drew my eyes with wonder, with foreboding.

"It's a question," said Werner, "of getting what I want. I'm going to get it to-night. You're a fool, sonny, if you don't come in on any terms. Don't you know what country we're in?"

The poor, pitiful figure of Cassilis fled before my eyes. I shuddered. "It is No Man's Land," I said. "There is no law in the wild, save the law of the wild."

"That's so," said Werner. "You can put two and two together, my lad. Don't you forget also that this was the land of the Inquisition. We're holding an inquisition on you, so to speak, this minute. This is Torquemada's Land, and I guess Torquemada's instruments are not far off."

The shadows stirred across the scrub, and Werner seemed to turn his head swiftly toward it and listen. The star was passing behind the white peak. I laughed.

There was no difference between them, Houston and Werner; they were both murderous ruffians. They had no right in a respectable world. Let them perish! I had been playing my cards languidly, not caring, or rather only caring so far as to tantalize and aggravate this man. What had I to do with the treasure now? I had the thought of Houston going down before those other rascals, and I hugged it to myself as I made my answers. But now I laughed. This man threatened me with torture. Let him go on and see. I wanted to

know exactly what kind of man would be let loose on Houston. I was anxious for him to prove himself savage, brutal. If he were demonstrably worse than Houston, I should rejoice. I laughed aloud.

"You are going to compel me to open my mouth?" I asked, with a sneer in my voice.

"That 's it," said Werner bluffly. "You can take my terms, or you can be persuaded."

"Persuaded is an admirable euphemism," I said. "You don't know Shakespeare, Werner, I take it. 'Oh good, Convey! Conveyers are you all?' Well, I suppose, we're all conveyers in a sense. We've been after what is n't ours."

"The Big Fish is his who finds it," said Werner.

"Well, it was found," said I.

"It was found by Raymond," he replied, "and he's dead. We've got the inheritance."

"It seems to me you have n't, but Houston has," I answered.

He uttered an oath. "Come, Poindexter, make your choice. We start before dawn."

"Are you quite sure that I shall speak?" I asked.

He gazed at me. "I reckon Jeff could make you speak," he said somberly, "or Miguel. Personally, I don't take a hand in such things."

"Supposing I said I don't know?" I said.

"If you said you did n't know the trail, you'd lie," he said fiercely, "and we'd make you confess it."

I mused. "Well, I don't know it," I said, after a pause.

Werner struggled to his feet. "Miguel!" he roared.

The smoke swayed to and fro, and the scrub disappeared and reappeared. A man of small stature came running up out of the darkness.

"Here's your job ready for you. Quick, damn you, man," shouted Werner. He had risen, a menacing ogre, gnashing teeth, frightening to children. I did not stir. I was newly aware of something seething in that shadow before the tent. Werner also grew aware of it. He ceased, stared, and his face cooled into a horrid grin.

"Wait a bit. I play the right bower," he said. "I'd forgotten."

Odd, wasn't it, that we had both been thinking of the same game?

"You can drop it, Miguel. Step lively, Maddock!"

Werner was looking athwart the fire to the shadowed tent, and out of the gloom Maddock moved suddenly, lank and cadaverous, a specter with a whining voice. He dragged at something — some one.

"There's my card," said Werner harshly, agrin, his eyes full of meaning and menace.

It was Miss Varley.

I started and exclaimed; she said nothing, but looked across at me.

"In the round-up," Werner was saying, "we coralled both. It seems I am indebted to this lady doubly. Now then, Poindexter, speak up. It's up to you."

"What do you mean?" I asked, shaken to my heart.

Werner spat. "I don't know what's going to happen to Miss Varley. I guess it's up to you," he said. "You stand in a mighty funny relation to her, come to think of it, kind of god, or fate. Anyway, she's in your hands!"

"I beg, Mr. Poindexter, that you will not consider me."

There was an aloofness in those cold words which chilled me. Did she understand? Had she understood? *Could* she understand? How much of our talk had she heard in those obscuring shadows?

"We must make a beginning and go on." Werner's voice it was. "You will remember how things happened in the Torquemada days. When we shall stop depends on you. So you see it's all in your hands."

"I can give you Raymond's secret," I said evenly, though my pulse beat like a watch, and there were strange voices in the chambers of my heart. "The treasure is to be sought in the temple of Astarnok."

Werner came across to me, and put his face close to mine, till his hot breath seemed to sear me. "By God, if you're cheating me —" he growled, and then, "All right, Maddock. It's off for the moment." He turned to me, and I saw Miss Varley fading into obscurity again. "You won't put me on the trail?"

"I have said I don't know it."

He mused. "Why?" he asked.

My old thought raced in my head, and I rejoiced

in it. Houston and Werner! Why, the latter had proved himself beyond my dreams. I could trust him. If there were any one more Satanic than Houston it was this black-avised, grinning devil. I had what I wanted. Unleash them and let them perish in mutual blood!

“Houston removed himself out of my purview some twelve hours since,” I said deliberately. “He was, when I last saw him, endeavoring to assassinate me.”

Werner uttered an oath which showed his interest. “Why did n’t you tell me this before?” he demanded, and, as I was silent, he went on suspiciously. “How do I know this is n’t part of the lay? My God, if it is — !”

He turned again, and called to Jeff. “I reckon that hour’s up, Poindexter,” he said. “We’ll fix you.”

I shrugged my shoulders. I was quit of all sense of responsibility now. I had nothing to decide. I had decided.

I was imprisoned in a tent with two half-breeds before it, and all the rest of the night there was the sound of voices, of preparations. It must have been about an hour before dawn, when the sky was lightening, that an uproar arose. There were shouts, and the noises of a concourse met, oaths, and the evidences of a quarrel. Suddenly the flap of the tent was pushed aside, and a black object barred the light.

“Are you there, damn you? Is this your doing?” It was Werner’s voice. “What?” I asked.

"The girl — you've got her —" He threw a brand from the fire forward and stared. "If it was you," he said, "I'd broil you."

"I don't understand," I said, with a curious exultation.

"She's gone," he said sullenly. "No, it was n't you. It was — it must have been the devil."

He swung out of the tent, and I fell back in my prison, delighted, rejoicing, yet with an odd sense of disappointment. But there was no time left me for reflections, for immediately the Indians struck the tent, and began to pack up. Before dawn we were on the march. I was kept rigidly under guard all that time in a scene of bustling activity, but I had no converse with any one until the moment of departure. Then I found myself under the special scrutiny of Miguel, a slim, malicious-eyed fellow, with some aspirations to dandyism. He spoke English, more or less broken, and more or less dirty, and he gave his orders without ceremony. I was mounted on a mule like the rest of the company, and I trailed up the valley in their midst, a captive without any active desire to be anything else. I was now on the road to the final act of the drama, I thought, and I was gleefully anxious to witness it. I did not know then how many scenes that act would contain ere the curtain fell for good.

I got no information out of Miguel, who was surly, and smoked and cursed his mule. But a little later Werner joined us. He had lost his mood of ferocity, and was amiable enough, even talkative.

"The girl did n't matter shucks, after all," he

told me, "though I'd give something to learn how she managed to get away." He looked puzzled.

"The girl didn't matter, as you say. You've got me," I answered him.

"Oh, we're holding you all right, for extra safety." He grinned. "I don't say I don't believe your tale, but I'm taking no risks, and Torquemada's there all the time, anyway."

"I am content," I said. "Let's get on. I suppose you know the place."

He regarded me curiously, as if he did not understand. Indeed, there was every reason why he should n't. "Astarnok is a sort of historic site hereabouts," he said. "Some of my men know it; I've heard of it myself. There was once a Chimu city there."

"Chimu!" I echoed.

"Yes," he said, "the civilization before the Incas. They say the Chimus go back as far as ten thousand years. They were wiped out or amalgamated by the Inca lot." He was evidently without interest in the Chimus, for he abandoned the subject.

"You seem to be in a hurry," he continued. "I suppose you're figuring that you've got a hand in this job. But you'll recollect you refused. It was on the alternative you surrendered. You haven't got a tittle of a share in the Big Fish, sonny."

"My good man," said I calmly, "do you suppose that if I had agreed to your terms I would credit you with the folly of keeping faith? I have quite another opinion of you—I rank you as too

heroic a scoundrel for that. I'm not worrying about the Big Fish."

He frowned, but I don't believe he minded my frankness.

"What the devil are you at, then?" he asked bluntly.

"It seems to me," said I, "that you go one better than Houston. Judging, at any rate, from your references and menaces last night, I put you higher in the ranks of crime. That's what I wanted to find out; that's what has given me such satisfaction. For now I have let you loose on Houston, I'm sure of getting what *I* want."

"What do you want?" he asked sharply.

"Houston, living or dead!" I answered.

His eyes searched me. "Oh!" he said at last. "So Houston's been selling you, too, eh? Houston would sell his mother. And he's slimy, too; he'd escape the penalty. By thunder, I've a notion Houston will be missing at the last trump. But you're wrong," he added, "I'd have kept faith. That's the difference between Houston and me. I daresay I'm worse than he in some ways. I'm no judge, but I guess I keep faith. He's a Judas. How has he let you out?"

"He sent me over a crumbling cliff when he'd finished with me," I explained.

"Ah!" Werner was obviously interested. "That was when you and the girl were on the hill, way back. That was it, was it? I was wondering —"

"You saw me there?" I asked.

He nodded. "Spotted you both. We kept tabs

on the girl. It puzzled me. I suppose she changed her mind. Women are like that. Anyway, she served us pretty well."

"Did you follow me?" I asked.

"Yes, but Maddock played the fool and lost your trail. However, we picked up the girl to go along with. She came in useful. I thought she might. She kept tabs on you, I reckon."

I began to see that there was a certain system in this gentleman's conduct. "The Indian?" I asked. "What became of him?"

"Indian!" he queried indifferently. "Oh, with the girl? He lit out, as they all do. I know the breed hereabouts."

Yet I could have sworn that Manuel was no Cholo, nor any Indian of those parts. I began to see something else, and that was perhaps an explanation of Miss Varley's escape.

"So Houston signed your death certificate, did he?" went on Werner. "Yes, he's equal to all that. It's like him to muddle it also. He don't do jobs clean."

"I hope you do, and will," I said fiercely.

"I think so," he answered, quite mildly. "I don't fancy Houston will get through my fingers. He did once; and, by thunder, he's got to pay for it."

"Will you tell me who Houston is?" I asked bluntly.

"He's a Judas; he sold us," said Werner.

"You mean he belonged to your gang?" I asked, perplexed.

"That's so. He sold us. It don't amount to a

bad tale, taking it all round. Houston's fly and cunning, but he's overreached himself."

"But he and Raymond were partners in the expedition for the Big Fish," I protested.

Werner laughed. "That was the stuffing he used, eh?" he said. "Raymond would n't have had him within a score of miles, if he could have helped it. It was Houston he bolted from, Houston and me."

There was no shame and no complacency in his statement; it was merely a statement, and that was all.

"I'm interested," I said. "Would you mind telling me more?"

"Not at all," said Werner. "We've both been sold, and we've got to make good on Houston."

"I'm glad you are what you are," I said. "I have another reason, a far stronger reason." He looked at me, interrogatively. "I had a friend —"

"Ah!" His exclamation was accompanied by a flash of the eye. "Yes, there was another. Of course we knew there were three of you. I was speculating about the third man; so that's it. You said you 'had' a friend. I take it Houston succeeded better with him then."

I nodded. I dared not speak.

"I don't believe I need really keep tabs on you," said Werner thoughtfully. "I kind of fancy you'd make a good ally. This Judas sold us. He's false all through. Look, Poindexter," and animation for the first time was in his heavy voice, "we were in country like this way back, and we'd prospected ourselves gaunt and naked, all five of us. We had lived, of course, on the usual canned stuff, and even that

petered out. The rations played havoc with us. We tried experiments with the grass, but they were n't a success. It was blazing hot in the day, and at night — oh, well, you had some, and can guess pretty well what it was.

“We were sick, dog-sick of it all, and were on the home trail, as tired men as you can want to see; and one evening, just as we got the camp fixed for the night, there tumbled in upon us out of nowhere this Raymond, sicker and tireder than we were. He fell at the tent flap, and we gave him a nip of spirits to fetch him round. But he was mighty sick, and could n't keep anything on his stomach for days. We could n't leave him there, and so we fixed up a litter and managed to carry him on the mules, but it must have jolted his inside, poor devil. It was n't exactly flat-racing there. Then he recovered a little, and was wonderfully civil. The don had good manners and style. He vowed he was profoundly grateful to us, and he hated to be a burden and all the rest of it. And I believe,” said Werner, laughing, “I believe it would have all gone at that if he had n't put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins and other things. Lord love us, there was no mistaking them; their appearance and age and everything about them was witness what they were. They were treasure from a cache!

“I stared at them, and Houston got on to it also, but the others did n't — not then. He wanted to make it up to us for our hospitality, he said. There was the value of a few thousand dollars in the jewels in his fist, and as he offered I, for one, was not

going to be foolish enough to refuse. But here Houston came in. He shot me a look, and put up a hand.

“ ‘Mr. Raymond, I take it you ’re our guest,’ he said, ‘we don’t make a profit out of sick men.’ ”

“That was Houston. That ’s where he came in always. If he ’d played straight — well, it ’s no good going over that. Anyway, Houston stopped me, and we had a talk that night. Raymond was full of gratitude, choked with it. He said our conduct was handsome, and he became very friendly. Houston, mind you, had n’t got any further idea than a cache somewhere. That was plain enough, but he wanted to know more. So did I, after our talk. And Raymond became friendly, and babbled. He ’d always taken an interest, he told us, in the Incas, and in the Spanish South American provinces, and he ’d formed theories. It was one night when we were nearing civilization that he spoke up, letting us into his secret. Of course, we had all of us heard rumors of the Big Fish. Who has n’t in Peru? Anyway, the name came up in his talk, and Houston’s elbow dug into my ribs. His teeth gleamed.

“ ‘The Big Fish!’ said he, leaning back, but wary as a hawk. ‘If a man should hook that, he ’d have to get a net to land it, I reckon.’ ”

“Raymond gave him a glance, for he, too, was as sharp as scissors, and shut up. ‘I should say you were right,’ he answered; and never a word more passed his mouth on the subject.

“Well, you ’ll think that was a poor scent to follow on, but it was n’t. Here was a man talking

of the Big Fish, and possessed of Inca gold and gems. Anyway, it was good enough to call the view-hulloa. Houston stuck to him like a leech. It was understood we were all in it. Houston was leading, because he was reckoned the first-class intellect among us, but we were all in it. To make a long story short, he smelled a rat. You see, he had n't taken the cache on his back, and so it meant an expedition, if he'd found anything. Houston watched him like a cat, and he overdid it. The old don got wind of us. He was in Lima at the time, and had been making preparations. That was what made Houston give himself and us away. He took alarm, and stopped, stayed in his hole a bit, and then bolted.

“He slipped us to Europe. Houston packed after him next steamer, and we followed, and after a while we ran him down in London.”

Werner pursed his lips. “We reckoned some of that Big Fish belonged to us. If it had n't been for us, he'd have been a corpse. He owed us a share, and if he did n't see it, we were going to help ourselves. That was how it was. We settled down to watch again, and it was mighty slow work. The man made never a move. Perhaps he was afraid he was being watched. Anyway, he squatted down in some London district — Bloomsbury, is it? — and lived quietly, and without a sign. At last we got tired of it, and we tried inside work. Raymond hired the upper part of a house which a retired butler rented, who was his landlord. We got him for a consideration, and we got admittance to

the place. Maddock had a try, and then Jeff; finally it was Houston's turn, but we could n't find a scrap of anything to throw light upon the Big Fish. Just then Raymond fell ill, and lay up, and that blocked our operations. So we sat and sucked our fingers, and swore in London Town like four fools. Then I tried my hand along with the butler, and the old boy smelled a rat again. He got nervous and peevish, the man said. He went out one morning hastily, and when he came back he'd a parcel in his hand. Mullins managed to see it afterwards. It was a lacquered box.

"I don't know if he suspected Mullins, but it had a look of it. 'Mullins,' said he, after a cab had been called that afternoon, 'I believe there were burglars in my rooms last night. Anyway, as I've only got one valuable possession, if it's that they're after, they'll have to burgle the National Safe Deposit,' and he departed with his parcel.

"That's where the lacquered box came in, and that sold us. There were two boxes, as it turned out, but Mullins only saw one; and that's how we came to make the mistake — unless it was a chance of the auction room."

"Your story is amazingly interesting," I said. "I am obliged to you, Werner. We have now reached the point where I come in."

"You've hit it, sonny. You come in precisely there, and, but for you, we probably should have had the Big Fish by now."

"But for me," I corrected, "the secret of the Big Fish would have been lost for ever. It would

have drifted out of that auction room, blown on the winds of chance, a meaningless phrase. I wish to God it had!"

But Werner was paying no heed. He hadn't finished; he was absorbed. "By thunder!" he said tensely, "to think that Houston played that trick on me!"

I became aware that the story was not finished. "What trick?" I asked.

"We made our shot in the auction room, as you know," said Werner, "and got the wrong box. I guess afterward you smoked something, and clung on to yours as a sporting chance. But Houston got on to you. He was angry at what he called the way we had mussed it up. He started out himself, missed it by a shave in your flat, and missed it by a bigger piece in the bungalow." Werner reined in his mule, and looked blindly at the rocks. "Damn the Judas! Then he threw us over, and made terms with you. Not a word did he let us know, but kept close and mum, and promised that and this, and said it could be left in his hands; but we had a doubt of him, and watched. You see, I knew the skunk. It grew plain he'd sold us. He was scared that time in London. Then Jeff used his knife —"

"Ah!" I said. "Now I understand."

"He was a fool to do that. That can come later. It nearly put us off guard. It was only the last moment that we got Coop aboard. I picked him up cheap in a London tavern, game for anything. He's a pretty agent, is Coop. Well, anyway, we managed it, and now we're hot on the trail."

He wiped his brow, lit a cigar, and laughed grimly as he puffed out the smoke.

“If there’s anywhere this trail leads to for Houston, it’s not paradise,” he added.

Jeff was shouting some distance ahead, up the valley, and his long arms went out, as if pointing. Werner left me, and pushed on his mule, picking its way with remarkable celerity among the scrub and boulders. The Indians and half-breeds, of which latter there were several in the party, brought the rest of the cavalcade to a standstill, and awaited orders. They lit cigarettes without visible excitement, and stood beside smoking flanks. The sun was streaming down on us, and the white peaks mocked our burned faces. Presently the train was in motion again. Werner dropped back slowly until Miguel and I overtook him.

“Houston living or dead you wanted, was n’t it?” he asked grimly. “Well, you can have him — I don’t know in which state myself yet. It means the same in the end.”

CHAPTER XI

THE TWO CAMPS

I KNEW by that that we were at near quarters, and I asked Werner.

“Astarnok’s across the ridge,” he said, “and friend Houston’s there. I’ll chaw him up in ten minutes,” he added, with savage vehemence; and later asked: “Is n’t there a play or something I saw way back in New York about ‘something lingering with boiling oil in it’? Curse the fellow! To think he’d dare to do me like this!”

His face was scarlet, and his eyes bulged, as if he were going to have a stroke, but he seemed to master himself, and returned to his conversation. He was by no means of that sinister nervous organization I had detected in Houston. Here was rank brute force and rank brute passion, but now in control.

“Expedition after expedition has tried for the Fish, Poindexter,” he said, with a queer note of triumph ringing in his voice, as though he already had his hands on the treasure, “and every one has failed. They found the Little Fish a hundred and fifty years ago, and a tidy hoard it was. But the Big Fish — there’s something in it to stir the

imagination, that age-long search, eh? It's picturesque, and would turn into a sort of romance. The last lot out perished of starvation and cold on the ranges. How Raymond struck it is a puzzle. He was interested in the Indians. I reckon he made out somehow through his knowledge of them. They don't know anything. I don't think they would take gold if you offered it to them. They don't understand it. They're full of traditions and superstitions. Raymond knew the lingo. I fancy that was how he got hold of his secret, mooning about among them. By Gosh, it was worth it, Poindexter!"

"Your narrative has been entertaining and certainly instructive," I said. "But there's a flaw in it so far as I am concerned."

"How's that?" said he. "Have you played me false?"

His eyes rolled in black menace.

"No," I said. "You have all I know. As I have hinted, I think I prefer you to Houston, probably because you're an unknown quantity, and Houston is n't. No; it's something in your narrative that puzzles me."

"I'll answer any questions," he said cheerfully. "I don't mind tabling my hand now. What you could do, my lad, even if you wanted to, don't amount to shucks now."

"I've told you I want Houston's head on a charger," I said. "But I have a weakness for a rational narrative, and I should like to ask how you discovered that the lacquer box would be sold at the auction room."

"The merest detail, my friend, the merest detail," said Werner, with his eyes alert on some object in the distance. It had no significance, however, and he came back to me. "Mullins, lad, Mullins, a man with all the traditional qualifications for butler, including silence and craft; Mullins, who is now waiting in London Town to buy a little place in Cheshire with his ill-gotten gains." He laughed. "Rum notion, some of your English townsfolk have. Mullins and his ideal of a little place with a bit of fishin', 'and a little 'untin', Mr. Werner,' says he. Mullins had the name of Raymond's solicitors, and we had nothing to do but watch." He paused, and went on meditatively: "Raymond died two days later; I fancy he had no time to give instructions about his box and his secret. Anyway, the lawyers had no inkling of it, for Houston called on them — one of his bits of bluff and cheek that gets him through sometimes. However, he did n't make much out of it. Takes a pretty deal to make much out of a lawyer. Everything was sold up and off in the usual way to wind up the estate."

"The estate!" I echoed thoughtfully. "Who was —"

But a signal was flashed on the knoll ahead for Werner, and he left me. For the moment our progress was checked, and it was checked by design. One of the Indians had kept us in touch with Houston's column, and it was now reported that he was moving down the valley beyond the rocky walls of our cañon. This puzzled Werner, who had heard from one of the Indians familiar with these parts

that Astartok lay farther up on the heights, — the grizzled and dreary ruin of a past civilization.

“He don’t know he’s followed. He’s got a surprise in store,” was Werner’s conclusion, with grim satisfaction.

That he took things so easily somewhat astonished me, now that we were within hearing, so to speak, of the clash of arms; but he was imperturbable as the action approached, pulled forth a long cigar, proffered me one, and smoked, as he watched the operations of his camp.

“It don’t matter a cuss-word what Houston does now,” he asserted genially. “I’ve got him. He can’t get away from me, and we can take our own time. What he knows I’ve got to know; what he finds is mine. We’ve got all the fun coming.”

I am bound to confess that it was not possible for me to take the situation with the same nonchalance. I burned to be at Houston, to sacrifice him, to see him in ashes. You may say this was a vindictive and unchristian spirit. I am only stating the facts of my emotions, — the emotions, remember, of one who had seen his friend barbarously done to death.

It was as night closed in that we came to our rest in a little sequestered gulch above the ruins of Astartok. The idea of that ruined sanctuary fascinated me. Werner was undisturbed. What he knew was that three miles down the valley was Houston’s camp, and that Houston was all unaware of our anticipation of him. This tickled Werner, and he made merry at supper with his unholy and unseemly crew. I did not know which of the ugly gang I

disliked most, the mean Maddock, the repellant Jeff, or that little, ratlike Miguel, who had been responsible for the knife-wound in Houston's body. They were to me a gang of brigands and nothing less; and I had no part nor lot with them. On Werner's own barefaced showing they had all been in a dirty conspiracy to rob an unfortunate old man of the legitimate rewards of his "find."

That reflection gave me instant pause, however. What was I — what had Cassilis and I been? I was afraid to face the exact logic of our status. The "find" had been Raymond's, and we had taken part in robbing his executors of its proceeds! No; I could not admit all that. The estate, whatever that stood for, was not in possession of the Big Fish, and never had been. Surely it was reserved for the bold spirits of an adventurous expedition. Houston, then? Or these unscrupulous freebooters? I gave up the puzzle. Anyway, I had no longer any relation to the treasure. I was there for another purpose, and if Werner and his thieves should assist me to that vengeance — no, to that justice — which my heart craved, I was content. I listened to Werner, smoked, and looked down on the broken stone walls fading into darkness. I could at least share Werner's grim satisfaction in Houston's ignorance of the fate that awaited him.

Werner, as I say, was in excellent spirits, and indulged his prisoner. He invited me to go down with him to the ruins which stood in a grass-grown space between ledges of boulders. Somehow I had expected to find more of a building than this scattered

heap of rocks. It had been of massive design once, as it was possible to determine from the site and the size of the stones, but under the wear of many corroding centuries had become merely a graveyard. To add to this impression, mounds rose all about the ruins, as it were the tumuli of the dead Incas. Yet I remembered that this was reputed to be of earlier origin than the Incas. Who were these ancient and forgotten Chimus, whose civilization had gone into the dust there thousands of years before, but who had practised arts and sciences in the era of the early Egyptian dynasties? Was this indeed one of their temples to unknown gods?

"That priest of yours does n't worship much here, I guess," said Werner's slow voice, breaking in on these speculations.

The priest of Raymond's message I had always taken as an adjunct to the "temple," but now my mind, long adrift from such considerations, faced the idea. There would and could be no priest in this place. I said as much to Werner.

"That's not Houston's idea," he said, looking down the valley in the twilight. "Man, you're not fit for a rough-house tackle of this sort," he added, laughing. "I'm brewing up against Houston, and he don't know it." He guffawed. "But he's doing my business down the valley."

"I don't understand," I said. "I don't want, as a matter of fact, to understand unless it bears on —"

"The head in a charger. I take your point," he interrupted. "Most people I know would n't have

sized you up, Poindexter. That tale would n't have held water. But I know a bit more. You can go ahead, anyway; and I'll tell you. Down below there is an Indian village, and that's why Houston's pitched there. He's quite smart. He smelled the priest in the village, and he's going to find him and nobble him."

"And you?" I asked, astonished at his coolness again.

"By the Lord, can't I crack Houston, like a flea?" He snapped his fingers contemptuously. "It only adds to the fun of the game that he should be doing my work down there."

He moved away as he spoke to go upward to the camp, but I did not respond.

"All right, sonny," he said, with his rich laugh, "I've told you to go ahead. I've squeezed you dry, and you can roll off."

The darkness swallowed him. Contemptuously I was given my liberty. I breathed free of the air, and after the sound of his feet had gone, I walked around the starlit ruins, inspecting, pondering.

A red fury against Houston was growing within me. I looked down, as Werner had done, and I thought I could see the fires of his camp. Swiftly, on an impulse which was almost that of an enraged animal, I wheeled around, and began to clatter down the rocky way toward the lower parts of the gorge.

As I progressed, I found the natural phenomena grow more gracious. The stony valley merged into an ampler stretch of valley clothed with grass and shrub, from which the environing hills retired. It

was evidently one of the oases of that mountain wilderness which we had reached. As I drew near the camp-fires of Houston's party, I was conscious of another than myself, and I drew into the shadows in the fear that I might be seen and recognized by one of that unscrupulous company. But no sooner had I done so than the figure I had seen slouched past me, and I seemed to recognize it as one of Werner's party. It was thus, then, that he kept watch, while his enemy and mine slumbered all unawares in the apparent security of his camp.

I turned my steps farther down and circumvented the camp, and then I became aware of another shadow. It was Houston!

If I had been armed with the revolver which they had taken from me, I could have shot him in his tracks. I followed, with a deepening malice, at an even distance, keeping him before me in the starlight. He picked his way downward as though he were familiar with it, and presently came out upon a flat where a mountain torrent roared, and where the uncertain light showed the outlines of several buildings. I guessed that this must be a native village in those wilds, and I began to have an inkling of what Houston wanted. He entered one of the huts, and disappeared from my view; and I sat without in the cold, clear night, awaiting him. It must have been quite an hour ere he appeared again, and he went upward as if he had finished his errand. I pursued him.

We had not gone more than a few hundred yards in this way, and had come to the bed of a stream,

when of a sudden he saw me. I had become careless through security, and, moreover, I had not reckoned on the silhouette which my figure would present against the empty sky. He turned, saw me, and ran forward toward me, crying out something in an unknown tongue. Unarmed as I was, I fled with all the speed of my feet into the brushwood, and scrambled up the side of the hill. A stone detached by my ascent acquainted him with the direction I had taken, and I heard the bushes part as he crept toward me. As noiselessly as I could I moved sideways along the declivity, from bush to bush, taking care to disturb no more stones. At this moment I had only room for one congratulatory thought, that he had not known me for what I was, but had supposed me one of the Indians.

The stars gave me a certain light for guidance, and I was not now afraid of being overtaken. It was unlikely that Houston would pursue a mere inquisitive Indian very far. That I was right in my conjecture was demonstrated by the silence which soon fell upon the scrub. I waited for a time before resuming my way, and when I did I moved rapidly up hill in the direction in which I calculated that the ruins of Astarnok lay. But a score of little tributary gorges added to the volume of the greater valley, and I soon came to the conclusion that I was ascending the wrong ravine. With a mental review of the topography, I made out that I must cross the spur on my right to reach the valley I wanted. When I had surmounted the ridge, I was pleased to think my conjecture had been right, for away south-

ward, but weakly conspicuous as a star, was a spot of light which I assumed was one of Werner's camp-fires. I crossed the ravine slanting upward, but after I had been walking for an hour I was forced to the conclusion that I had been mistaken. The light glowed still in the distance, but seemingly as remote as ever. I stared, wondering. It was higher up, between two peaks of the Sierras, and burned white and still. Could it possibly be a star, I asked myself; and into my head flashed the thought of Cassilis. I could not say why I associated him with it. It was preposterous. Yet he was so constantly in my thoughts that it did not seem strange. I had a curious fancy that the light was drawing me onward, and that it would guide me to Cassilis, seated by his fire, hailing me with his cheerful, well-remembered voice — "Hulloa, Jack!" — Cassilis, whose maimed and broken body I had seen go over the precipice in the mountain torrent.

At the head of the valley I came to a pause. The cold of the night wind blowing from the snow-clad Cordillera, was intense, but I was warm from my exercise. I did not know how long I had been wandering, but I judged that the night was far spent. After a rest, I made my way along the moraine which joined these lesser gorges under the shadow of the greater peaks, and so descended one which I thought I recognized as that which held our camp. I proved mistaken once more, however, and so the dawn was near at hand before I actually reached the ruins of the Chimu temple.

As I approached, worn out now with my nocturnal

travels, I saw a figure moving solitary in front of me, a figure lean and tall, with the walk of an Indian, and supposing it to be one of Werner's men, I was on the point of hailing it. Then I refrained, for I remembered that Houston's camp was not far, and that this might be a spy from below. But the man appeared to make no attempts to hide; he went straight forward upon his way through scrub and rock, until he disappeared within the ruins of the temple. I followed with caution, and found myself behind a broken wall of stones. The Indian was visible now in the center of the ruins, and was motionless there as if he had been a statue. I gazed for several minutes, and he did not move, and the sky grew perceptibly lighter. I could see him quite plainly now, standing in the middle of the tumuli, and I could even make out his features. What struck me was the strange head-dress he wore, which seemed to hang down his back for some distance.

The light grew, and then, just as I was wearying of my position and my curiosity, the man stooped, went upon his knees, and, bowing his head to the earth, remained thus for some minutes. I watched in silence, and then suddenly a light away across the shoulder of the Sierra drew my eyes. I turned, and there was the dawn. In a flash I knew. The Indian had been making his obeisance to the sun. Here was one of the ancient sun-worshipers.

CHAPTER XII

THE RUINS AT ASTARNOK

HOUSTON came up the valley about ten o'clock that morning. I was roused from a deep sleep by Werner, and saw his grim features asinine in a grin before me.

"Like to see the fun?" he inquired.

When I had grasped the situation, I scrambled to my feet, and while I made my preparations, learned that Werner's spies had brought him word of Houston's movements.

"Where did you get to last night?" he asked, regarding me quizzically. "Lucky you had n't a pistol, eh?"

I stared, and then I began to understand. Werner's spies had knowledge of more than I had suspected; they must have been on Houston's track when he visited the Indian village, and on mine also.

It seemed that Werner had a dramatic surprise in contemplation, for he took no one with him but me, and he waited behind a portion of the temple ruins in a mood of anticipatory gusto. I must say that the first sight of Houston by day thrilled me; I could understand now those primitive instincts of hate, revenge, and blind passion which lie at the

roots of poor human nature. Werner had said it was lucky that I had no gun, and I wondered at the adjective. When Houston entered through a breach in the stonework, debonair, watchful, and resolute, I felt that I moved. Werner's hand was upon my arm the next moment, and it was like bands of iron in its grip. My glance swept him with its angry survey, and I saw his face, massive, set, stolid, yet with some bubbling undercurrent in it. He suggested some one waiting until the quarry was within reach. Houston inspected the temple, and made a circuit of it within the broken walls. The tumuli drew his eyes, and in his preoccupation he came toward us, his light eyes flickering, yet giving him a certain human air. It was at this moment that Werner chose to spring his surprise.

"Say, Houston!"

The man looked up at Werner, where he had shown himself beyond the stonework, and though this must have been an amazing encounter for him, he did not change face. Werner, I am sure, in such a case, would have displayed some emotion, if only that of anger and ferocity. But Houston stared, and then showed his white teeth above his beard in a smile.

"That you, Werner? This is luck!" he said easily.

"I'm glad you find it so," said Werner heavily; and here I came into view.

Now in Houston's eyes I was dead and done for, but his smile wavered only for a moment, and was caught again as his eyes met mine.

"You, too, Poindexter!" he said. "This is more interesting than ever."

He could not, however, keep something out of his throat, something that cracked. He must have guessed then at the explanation of Werner's presence, and he must have known that the secret was no longer his alone.

"I'm glad to see you about," went on Werner, seating his square body on the wall. "It's saved us a trip, maybe, down to your camp." He turned loosely a hand which held a revolver. "There are many ways of settling with you, Houston, and I've not made up my mind yet. After all, it might save trouble if I were to shoot you out of hand now, though I'll admit I've thought of other things when I was kind of lonesome and needed cheering."

Houston looked at his nails, a trick I remembered.

"You are at liberty to act as you decide," he said easily. "But I don't fancy you'll go in for melodrama, at least yet."

"The Court is always anxious to listen to anything the condemned prisoner may have to say in his defence," said Werner, who was enjoying himself. "Go ahead, Houston. Any mitigating circumstances? Any orphan children?"

He leaned toward me and added: "For your private delectation, Poindexter, I may remark that Houston is the man who killed his father and mother, and then appealed to the judge for mercy on the ground that he was a poor orphan."

Werner grinned at his own wit, and with the weapon in extreme evidence, eyed his victim.

"The wilderness tells no tales, Houston," he said, "and Poindexter won't, I guess. He's after you himself."

"What you say about the wilderness strikes me," said Houston, faintly smiling. "It hides all; it's difficult to find anything in the wilderness, anyway, and more specially if one takes the trouble to conceal it."

"Cassilis — !" I said, and the word was a snarl on my lips. I could utter no more. I choked.

Houston's glance was penetrative, swiftly precautionary; it summed up my unarmed state. He changed his countenance not a jot or tittle.

"You see, Werner, you can't afford to lose me," he said softly, "for I hold the priest."

"The priest!" Werner was clearly taken aback, and his face grew ugly.

"You are doubtless familiar, through our mutual friend there, with the fact that the priest here has the secret of the Big Fish. Well, the priest's in my keeping."

As the man's cool face, expressing no triumph, was presented to us, I wondered how far he spoke the truth, this unscrupulous liar!

There was something savage, something primeval in the ferocity of Werner's face, as he made reply.

"Anyway, I hold you, and you're not likely to forget it."

"Then, my dear fellow, we're all satisfied," said Houston lightly.

He began to hum an air, and proceeded with his investigations, Werner eyeing him with the medi-

tation and potential fury of a bull waiting to charge. I don't think he had looked for this; he had expected triumph all along the line, and he did not like the counter. Yet Houston had placed him in a predicament, if what he said was true. Werner could do nothing without the priest, and he was aware of it. The situation was rendered more bitter by the fact that he could not be sure if Houston was lying. So the scoundrel held Werner in a cleft stick, whether he held the priest or not.

Houston strolled off presently, when his inspection was over, and Werner with an oath returned to his camp. That he was in a black temper was demonstrated by his attitude to his men. Ruffians and desperados as I had reason to believe these, they were evidently cowed by a superior force such as was concentrated in Werner. He gave orders which sent half a dozen men packing, including his partners. Meanwhile a notion had dawned upon me.

Werner's plans embraced a ransacking of the Indian village. One of his Indians spoke the lingo of these tribes, and he was utilized as the Chief Inquisitor.

The Indians, who differed somewhat in physiognomy from the Cholo to whom I had grown accustomed, were a quiet, peaceable folk, living on the borders of starvation.

There were llamas and other animals down the valleys, and they cultivated coffee and corn, remaining self-sufficing in their primitive isolation. They were amenable to the overtures of Werner's spokesman, but showed no friendliness. Indeed, it was

possible to detect in their attitude at times a reticence, a shyness, and a distrust. White folk came their way but rarely, and in general these must have been rude prospectors, and pioneers without consideration for the indigenous inhabitants of these inhospitable regions. I had by chance the opportunity of examining one, an intelligent fellow of some authority; for I was present when he was interrogated, and I added my questions through the interpreter. The stereotyped question had met with the one answer.

“Where is the priest?”

“There was no priest. There was Zaga.”

“Where then was Zaga?”

A look of suspicion passed over the troubled face.

“He was gone.”

That had been the invariable answer, while Werner's face grew blacker.

“Where was he gone?”

The man knew nothing. He had gone on the previous night, and had never returned. No one knew where he was. Then came my question, which arose out of the notion I had taken, as I have told you.

“Ask him what time the man disappeared. Was it at night?”

The interpreter obtained assent.

“At what hour?”

The priest, it appeared, had left his house after midnight, and had never returned.

“Ask him which house is the priest's?”

“Oh, fudge, Poindexter, we know all that, and

that Houston interviewed the man last night," interrupted Werner impatiently.

Well, it was no business of mine if he failed to find the priest; only Houston interested me. So I said nothing of what I had seen that dawn, of the impassive Indian waiting in the precincts of the temple, of the bowed head of the sun-worshiper. The priest, Zaga, had been at liberty then, I could swear. It was just possible that he had fallen into Houston's hands since, but I doubted it.

Werner also was in doubt, though he knew nothing of the visitant. I don't think he believed Houston, or, at any rate, he remained in a condition of mental suspense. He operated on the supposition that Houston might be telling the truth. Yet if he had been convinced of this, I am sure that the man would have recalled the methods of Torquemada of which he had grimly reminded me. He said nothing to me, but I came to the conclusion that he had decided to let Houston believe he was believed, and to keep watch. If the priest were at large, having taken alarm, or for any other reason was hiding himself, it would be better to have an extra pair of eyes to search with; and in any case, Werner could reflect that Houston could do nothing without his knowledge. So it came about that while engaged in waiting on events, Werner turned his attention to the tumuli in the shell of the temple.

He began to excavate, I don't know with what hope or expectations; it might have been merely to mark time. But at least he had an interested spectator in myself. Somehow this relic of a long

perished civilization seized on my imagination, even, if I may put it so, on my pity. It seemed so far away, so distant and alien from the modern way of men. It was a place of sepulture, as was soon evident; and, grave by grave, the remains of that lost race came easily to the light. They came in the form of shards and vessels, offering strange evidence of the high artistic tastes of the vanished Chimus, who had sunk, perchance, beneath the onslaughts of their successors, the Incas. Yet truly the Incas were in a less civilized condition, and nearer barbarism. Ten thousand years might have lapsed since these pots and vessels were buried in the sepulchres of their former owners. As I watched them dug up, I was awed. The pottery was in various colors, and elaborately painted and modeled. No trace of lettering, however, appeared on the pieces. The most were in the form of water-vessels with hollow handles. Some were purely painted vessels, others were grotesques in bas-relief. The Chimu heads modeled on this pottery were of a bold Coptic cast, and seemed to claim kinship with those early Egyptians whose dynasties were probably contemporaneous with the prime of Chimu civilization.

All these uncovered treasures would have been dear to the eager heart of the antiquarian, but to Werner and his kind they were as the broken bottles of a picnic party. He was after treasure of another sort, and grimly resolved on getting it.

Between the two camps brooded an atmosphere that one felt was ominous; it was that of the close calm preceding the thunder-storm. I am bound to say

that Houston exhibited no sign of disturbance. He was as elegant and civil in his behavior as heretofore, a polished scoundrel with blackness in his ugly heart.

And I, too, remained in a condition of neutrality, brooded over also by a somber emotion, until that happened which I am now to relate.

You will recall that I had my suspicions, that I had formed a theory, and that I held my tongue. What part or lot had I in the quarrels and affairs of these ruffians, that I should assist either with my advice? Because I wanted vengeance on Houston was no reason to help Werner to the treasure, unless by this means alone I could exact what I wanted. So thinking I knew more than either, I was silent, and watched.

On the third night I rambled on the Sierra again, crossed a valley of rocks, and was brought up by the gleam of a distant light. It shone like that flame I had noticed before, and hailed me like a beacon. What was it in that air, perhaps, on those lofty altitudes, that seized on me and urged me forward? Looking back on the incidents I cannot understand; I can only record. That speck of light invited me, drew me. I set out to find it.

The night was sharp, with a still cold, and rich with a plenitude of fine stars. If I have been able to suggest to you anything of the nature of that country, you will picture the road over which I went, stumbling and blind to the plain sense of my position. What sort of fool was I, in pursuit of this phantom, this will-o'-the-wisp? Ah, well, deep down in my

heart, hardly recognized or acknowledged, but still living, was a hope. If I was alive for anything, I was alive then for justice, and yet not for justice, but for vengeance, which is God's. Cassilis was always in my thoughts, a dear companion, a trusted friend, a helpless victim. That flicker of light represented to me something which I could not have interpreted at the time. In that unmerciful wilderness it heralded hope and yielded comfort. I stumbled on toward it.

To write the story of one journey across such land is to write the history of all that are uneventful. Mine went without disaster; it was mere physical weariness that gained possession of me. And yet, I was held up by that brisk hope of which I have spoken. I do not know how long it took me to surmount the shoulder of the mountain whence I imagined the light to issue. It may have been several hours. And, to my cold, blank despair, when I reached the summit, there was nothing — no light, no appearance or semblance of any. I stood wondering and meditating. Tired as I was, I had been sustained by a thought. Now I began to feel lassitude steal through my limbs. I had followed a mirage. What I had taken to be a beacon of welcome and consolation had turned out to be darkness. There was a supreme silence about the peak which I had climbed. Stars filled heaven, as I have said, and winked at me solemnly. It seemed a mockery. It was not for that pale, uncomfortable light that I had struggled so far. I could have shaken my fist at the blank sky. I was ill. I was burning now with

a fever, and I dimly recognized it, without minding. And at last I did raise my arms, and waved them in defiance. I shouted my passionate protest to the stars. And then I was aware of something that stole out and moved toward me, and I turned, and I knew it was a woman.

It was then that I fell, fell toward her, not knowing what I said, but calling on her and seizing her hands, and kissing them, and kissing the skirt against which my head rested ere it reached the earth.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PRIEST

I HAVE fainted but twice in my life, and this was the first time; nor do I know how one is wont to come back out of unconsciousness. It is odd, perhaps, that I should have come back as I did out of that first swoon, not with the oppression of sickness and sadness of spirit, but rather as one comes down a pleasant vista from invisible and pleasant delights, from some golden palace of dreams. I came back, I say, wrapped in this beautiful atmosphere, and was not aware that my head was burning and my tongue parched. A light was in my eyes, and lo, it was the light of a camp-fire.

Turning my head, I saw a woman's figure by me, and I rose on an elbow.

"Are you better?" It was Miss Varley's voice, soft and clear as always.

"Yes; I must have gone off," I said, struggling to sit up. "Excuse me. There's the fire."

She realized what my abrupt and bewildered exclamation meant, I think, for she answered:

"Yes, we did n't know who it was approaching; so we blanketed it. We have to be very careful."

"Yes, yes," I nodded. "Take all the care possible.

There is a pack of ravening thieves — how did you escape? ” I asked.

“ Manuel found me,” she replied.

“ I thought so.”

“ He is an adept at tracking, and also — at other things. We got off quite easily. They ’re a poor sort of ruffian,” she ended contemptuously.

“ I don’t know.” I shook my head. “ I’ve seen something of them. Poor! Yes, some; but Werner is not. Werner rather frightens me — sometimes.”

I thought she was looking at me curiously.

“ Frightens you — ! ” But she broke off. “ You must not engage yourself too much. I have given you brandy. I hope that was right.”

“ Quite! ” I replied. “ I feel ashamed of myself. A touch of fever, and a little over-fatigue, and I go down like a child.”

What was ringing in my ears as it were the voice of some one not myself? What were those things I had called out, cried out, as I fell at her feet? I was troubled, but her face, grave and thoughtful and so beautiful, was in the full flame-light of the fire. She was still the queen of those snow-mountains, though a gracious queen.

“ I fancy you must have gone through more than you realize,” she said. “ Your strength has been overtaxed. But I am glad you have made your escape also.”

“ Escape! ” I echoed, and realized then that she knew nothing of the motives which had actuated me, nor of my present relation to Werner. “ I have not escaped,” I said.

There was a subtle change in her eyes. "You have joined forces with that man for the discovery of the treasure he spoke of?" she said coldly.

"No; I am partner with no man," I told her. "I have a mission of my own."

"I'm afraid I only gathered parts of the story," she said, in the same low, cold voice. "I gathered that you were all on the same errand. You prefer then to work by yourself with your friend?"

"My friend!" I cried, and stopped suddenly. I had a difficulty in controlling and ordering my voice. "My mission has to do with that friend. Cassilis is dead!"

A cry that was like a little moan sounded somewhere close in the night. Miss Varley's face was startled into emotion.

"Dead!" she repeated.

"He was killed by Houston's orders," I explained, in a voice dry and hard, which I did not recognize as my own.

"He wanted to get rid of both of you," she said, and was silent.

Somewhere I seemed to hear a sound of sobbing.

"That is why I am with Werner," I said. "You can guess my mission."

"I don't know," she said sadly. "Perhaps you are wrong. You remember the old text."

"Yes," I answered, "but God works by instruments, and I am one."

"I wonder." She stood looking into the fire; and after a long silence she said gently: "Will you

tell me how you came to be mixed up with Houston? It has puzzled me. If you would rather not — ”

“ I will tell you everything,” I said. “ It all began in an auction room, where I bought a lacquered box.”

“ A lacquered box ! ” she repeated in astonishment.

And from that point, I entered into the story, and I told her what has been set down in these pages, of Houston, of the gang which he had betrayed, of Werner’s tale of Raymond — I gave her a succinct narrative, to which she listened in silence, but with evident interest. At the close, she stirred.

“ And you have lost your friend,” she said, with that new gentleness. “ Do you think it was worth it? ”

“ Not all the treasure in the world can bring back one loyal heart, nor is worth consideration in the balance,” I said sadly. “ But how did we know? Man’s like that. He has no vision. Seers and prophets of old may have had. All we can hope to do now is to snatch a glimpse of to-morrow. We started on a stirring adventure, Dick Cassilis and I; and he has perished. It is a man’s life and a man’s death. But that he perished as he did is sacred in my memory, and only one thing can satisfy justice.”

“ How did he die? ” she asked, lowering her voice.

“ No; no,” I said. “ I can’t tell you.”

She shuddered. “ I wish I could persuade you not to go back,” she said presently. “ At least you must wait here and recover.”

I struggled to my feet at this unconscious reminder.

"No; it is impossible," I said. "If I stayed, I should embarrass you. Werner would be certain to look for me, and you would be discovered. You must not run risks. These people are bashi-bazouks, ruffians without scruple. They will let nothing stand in their way. I must go back to-night."

"It is impossible — with your fever," she protested.

"I am better; I am rested. I must go back now."

After a moment's hesitation, in which she appeared to weigh the situation, she spoke.

"Then you must take Manuel and mules. You're not fit to walk."

To this course I assented, and Miss Varley went away to give the necessary instructions. I had forgotten the invisible voice that moaned and sobbed, but now a recognition of it was forced upon me. There came out of the darkness Mrs. Chester, her hair tumbled about her pretty head.

"You are right to wait for vengeance," she said brokenly. "Take vengeance also for me."

I held her hand, and I promised. "God do so to me, and more also —"

"I — I — oh, I can't believe he is dead," she burst forth, and broke from me, weeping.

Miss Varley joined me. "Poor Freda!" she said. "You see the heart of a woman, Mr. Poindexter."

"I take off my hat on that holy ground," I replied reverently.

"Tell me how you found us," she asked presently.

"There are so many things I could ask you; but you must go."

"It was the desire of the moth for the star," I said softly. "I was called across the mountain by your watch-fires."

"I don't understand — quite," she said.

"I saw your fire once before, and I tried to get to it, but lost it. This night I found it again, and I climbed up to it."

"But why?" she asked, with a curious expression on her face.

"I don't know. I had some feeling about it. I have been so long wandering in these regions that I think I unconsciously attached some meaning to it. It stood for something to me — something I did not quite frame in my thoughts. It was a beacon calling to me. I put it that way."

"It is strange," she said gently, and held out her hand. "I hope you will find it a beacon, if you are in trouble. I don't like your going back to those men. But remember, there is the light. Yes, I'm glad you looked upon it that way."

"And you?" I asked. "Are you going down to the coast?"

There was a moment's pause ere she answered.

"I don't know. There is the Montana over there, full of forests and verdure. Perhaps we shall go by the upper waters of the Amazon, and go home."

"Home!" I echoed the word.

"Remember the beacon," she said, as I passed from her, for Manuel was waiting with the mules.

"I will remember," I called back, as the dark swallowed me up.

When I parted from Manuel, I was within a mile or so of Werner's camp, and the night was loosening. Reinvigorated by my rest, and by the refreshment of that pleasant interview, I made haste down the empty gorge, and surmounted the hill on which the ruins of Astarnok were situated.

You know that odd feeling that comes over one sometimes, that what is happening has happened before. Rossetti expressed it in those fine lines which begin, "I have been here before." They jumped to my memory as I walked in the dissolving darkness amid the ugly scrub, and with bitter irony I made the contrast.

"I have been here before,
But when or how I cannot tell:
I know the grass beyond the door,
The sweet keen smell,
The sighing sound, the lights around the shore."

My thoughts ran on in advance to the next verse, "You have been mine before," and paused to tremble with a certain exultation and fear. And then in an instant, I was aware of where I was, and I knew what had stirred that secret spring. Ahead of me, in the faint light, stalked another figure, as it had stalked before. It was the Indian priest.

I followed soundlessly, and the man moved forward in stately dignity and aloofness. I wondered what he was doing there, so near to danger. I had guessed that Houston lied when he spoke of having his hands on the man. It was now clear to me that

he had endeavored to obtain from the Indian the secret to which Raymond had referred, had failed, and that the man had fled in alarm, and was in hiding. Yet, if so, what did he here, exposing himself rashly?

I knew that we must be near the ruins now, and it seemed that the man was walking into a certain trap. But he kept on, a commanding figure, now seen in the better light as a man of evident age. He went forward as though he were on a sacred mission, and barely halted when he reached the tableland on which the ruins lay, with the tumuli about them. Werner would certainly have set a guard on the excavations, and the Indian was inviting his capture. I watched from among the scrub, and I saw him pass across the open space in the twilight, and enter the precincts of the ruined temple. As yet, there was no sign of Werner's sentry, and it came upon me that he was probably some distance away, for the Chimu mounds stretched over a goodly space of ground. But, as I reached the verge of my "cover," I thought I discerned a second moving figure, and this I set down as Werner's sentinel. It was plain that he, too, was watching the Indian, who was now visible within the space bounded by the dilapidated walls. The priest it was who drew my eyes, rather than the sentinel.

The Indian had advanced to the center of the ruins, and, as I had seen him before, he stood silent, motionless. He was waiting for the first beams of the sun. In sympathy with him, I turned, and looked eastward across the vast mountain, and my eye was caught by

an outstanding peak. It was there, I calculated, that Miss Varley's camp was pitched, from which I had come that dawn. A certain tremulous motion stirring in the heart ran through me. My eyes came about; the Indian had fallen to his knees. Suddenly, by the peak, streamed a long shaft of light. Was it Miss Varley's fire? I started. No; that was impossible. Yet the light arose from the very place I had identified with her camp. It flowed whitely, palely down the mountain, and struck the ruined temple, illuminating the kneeling figure of the Indian, who had bowed his head in worship. The other man was watching, like myself, from the surrounding scrub, but I could no longer see him.

Next, I observed that the Indian, still on his knees, was scraping in the ground where he crouched, and, as I watched, he scooped out a hole, and inserted a hand. Something was in the hand he brought forth, and he rose to his feet with this object.

The solution rushed into my mind; he had unearthed something he had buried, and that was the secret to which Raymond had referred, and which both Houston and Werner were seeking.

I made a few steps forward, and then stopped abruptly: for, out of the scrub, on the farther side, darted a man, and as I stared in doubt and wonder, he had sprung upon the Indian. The horrid thing passed almost in a flash. I saw the two close, the mere elements of a struggle, a hand uplifted, a blow, and the Indian toppled loosely to the earth. His assailant slipped into the shadows of the rock; but I had recognized him — I knew him.

I ran forward now, and, crossing through a gap into the temple, stooped over the stricken figure of the Indian. It was only a moment's examination, but it sufficed. The man had been stabbed through the heart, and was as dead as the Chimus in their mounds about me. Hardly giving heed to my actions, but filled only with a hatred that was bursting bonds within me, I ran out of the ruins into the open where Houston had fled. If I had sought him, it appeared that he sought me, for I found him waiting, poised, as he always seemed to be, in expectancy, and, above all, ready for me. He drove at me with his knife.

"Second chance, Poindexter," he said, almost under his breath.

I slipped aside, and protected myself behind a bush. How deeply was I chagrined that no weapon had been allowed me! Werner had been afraid of my violence; this was his recompense, that I was defenceless against the arch-enemy, who was making off with the secret for which men had traveled ten thousand miles, and had committed murder.

I waited. Houston was bent on my death, this second time, and I knew why. If he had had occasion before, he had more occasion now, for, if he left me alive, I would warn Werner, and bring his plans to naught. He dashed through the shrubbery after me, and struck. It was as if a needle took my arm at a tangent. I retreated, feeling within my hands a growing power that would swell out and choke the life out of him. But the time was not ripe.

He came at me, for he could see the rustling of leaves, and could hear the noises of the underwood.

Twice more I eluded him, and each time, in imagination, I felt his neck cracking under the pressure of my arms. I was sure I could beat him physically. His neck was a delicate thing, unlike his monstrous mind. The third time he bore me back, into an open space.

"Time, Poindexter!" he said, grinning. "It's up!"

"The third chance!" I gasped, with a queer feeling in my head.

"I'll finish it sooner," I seemed to hear him say, and I was aware that he had drawn a pistol. I heard no sound, but something stung me, as I slipped behind a cactus bush. There was a fizz and a dull thud, and I knew he was firing with an air-gun. The man had the craft of the devil. I made a dart at him, and trusted all to the load of my superior strength. Something met me half-way, and I had the same strange feeling that I had experienced in Miss Varley's camp.

I have said I fainted twice only in my life. This was the second time, and within only a few hours of the first. I had been overborne by the physical and spiritual trials of the last weeks, and I was sick with fever. Yet that swoon was the salvation of my life. I came out of it hours later (for the sun was fairly high across the saddle), and sat up, stiff and ill at heart. I had been struck by one of the bullets, but only in the superficial muscles of the neck, and Houston had left me for dead. I had bled freely, which had probably persuaded him that I was gone. But I am sure that the wound was insufficient to account for

my fainting, and that, unless I had succumbed to the weakness of my condition, I should have shown fight, and perished under his knife.

I sat up, and gaped at the sun, and all the events of the past dawn came back to me. Houston was gone, with the secret of the Big Fish. How long had I lain there? I got to my feet with some difficulty, and began to walk toward Werner's camp. It lay some hundreds of yards away at the back of the Chimu mounds, and I passed the ruins on the way to it. In the middle lay the dead body of the Indian. I wondered that it had not been discovered. Where was Werner's sentinel?

The camp was still in slumber when I reached it, and I awoke Werner by stumbling over his tent peg. He sat up, and covered me with a revolver.

"Give me a weapon," I said. "Man, I want my weapon back."

"What is it?" he asked, after he had examined my face, and noted the blood on my neck.

"Houston!" I said. "Do you call yourself a match for him? Man, he's stolen a march on you while you slept. He's off with the key you want."

"What in h — do you mean?" he asked, rolling on to his feet, and surveying me blackly.

And so I told him. In an instant, the camp was alive under his orders. Jeff was sent to the ruins, and Miguel made search for the sentry. This poor wretch, a Cholo Indian, was found dead, with a bullet in him, on the outskirts of the scrub.

"There's your air-gun," said Werner grimly. "That's how he got in. He's got to pay me twice

over now, by thunder!" and a little later, beside the body of the hapless priest, he stooped awkwardly, and peered into the hole. "Yes, you're on the right lay; you've smart wits. I guess I'll take you along, Poindexter. You shall have your gun. Maddock, where's that revolver?"

CHAPTER XIV

THE CONFERENCE

I HAD begun by this time to take the measure of the unscrupulous man with whom I was dealing, and I recognized that, in a way, Werner, for all his substantial tenacity and sangfroid, was inferior to his adversary, by reason of the latter's better imagination. Houston might have no method, but he had a vivid mind and a daring, and his latest move had embarrassed Werner. Nevertheless, after the first outbreak of ferocity, the man displayed no chagrin. He issued orders sharply, and seemed never in doubt. Jeff had already been despatched in reconnaissance, and, though Houston must have had two hours' start, Werner was confident as to the result.

"I'm king of this wilderness," he said savagely, "and he's got to lick my boots before I have him bowstringed."

When I came to think of it, there did not seem to be much room for an undiscovered force in those parts. One way or another, Houston must leave tracks, and the Indians of the village would be able to give us information. This, indeed, was demonstrated at once, for Jeff returned with the news that Houston had struck camp more than an hour since,

and had ascended the farther gorge, in an easterly direction. Werner's dispositions being now made, he descended with the mule pack to the village, left word as to the murder of the priest, and followed after the murderer.

"I'll reap a reward there, maybe," he said, when he had communicated news of the priest's death. "I guess I may have sown death for Master Houston. Anyway, it may tip up the balance."

The valley was a green ravine for some miles, and it was not difficult to track Houston upward; but toward the upper reaches it deteriorated into a rough channel of boulders, and we lost the trail. It was probable that he had continued up the valley, but, on the other hand, he might have turned off and ascended the spurs on either side. Thus Werner was compelled to divide his forces, and to send reconnoitering parties in no fewer than three directions. He himself, with two mestizos and myself for company, continued up the valley. When we had selected a camp for the night, we sat down to await the others, and they dribbled in by sunset, with no news.

The following day was a rough copy of its predecessor. As far as our scouts were outflung, no sign of Houston was visible. He had vanished as completely as if he had been wiped out by a cataclysm of nature; in fact, more completely, for in the latter case, we should, at least, have had the evidence of his bones.

Werner said little, but his face grew dogged and ferocious. It was not the first, nor the second, nor even the third time, I conceived, that he had been

outgeneraled by the superior and more facile mind. But he had at least this virtue, that he would not recognize defeat, and that nothing short of physical failure would drive him to give up the quest. Our scouts sought Houston far and wide, and my only fear was that, in their explorations, they might happen upon Miss Varley's camp, which was gone by this time I knew not where. Perhaps, I reflected, with melancholy satisfaction, she was already far away, descending into the abysmal forests of the Upper Amazon.

On the fourth day, Werner was justified of his policy. The death of the priest tipped the balance. An Indian came up the valley with information, and within three hours Houston's hiding-place was leaguered. It was situated in a little depression in a hillside, invested with bushes, and it might have escaped Werner's notice till the crack of doom. Werner approached and challenged, like a mediæval baron. He pushed aside the scrub at the entrance, and called on Houston.

"I've got you coralled, Houston," he shouted. "You've not a red cent of a show."

There was a tension among us during the silence that followed. We were not even sure that the man was there, or, being there, whether he would respond. But the bushes parted, and the bandit appeared, smiling and smoking.

"Good day, Werner," said he lightly. "I had you covered, but it was no go. Who's that? My excellent friend, Jeff, in the background, eh? Yes, I'm done. Step right in, and talk."

It seemed for a moment doubtful if Werner would accept this suspicious invitation, which recalled the fable of the spider and the fly. But he did.

"All right. I guess I hold you, Houston," he said.

I pushed forward in his wake, and Houston's eyes met mine more seriously.

"I believe I'm afraid of you most of all, Poin-dexter," he said. "Anyway, come along. Let's be friendly for the moment."

Werner had passed an order to Jeff, his fighting lieutenant, ere he entered the scrub, and I followed, with my hand in the pocket which contained my revolver. Houston went in front with an unconcern which was almost ostentatious, and presently we came into a little clearing where the camp was set. It was a neat establishment, with a nicely-rigged stable for the mules in one corner under a beetling cliff, and the tents spread about symmetrically. The encampment looked as if it had designed to be permanent, and had a patent air of comfort. One or two Indians or mestizos idled about, smoking and playing some native game of chance. Werner's eyes bulged out.

"Pretty idyllic scene, ain't it?" said Houston, stroking his beard. "I'd reckoned to be here for a week or two longer. But that's over. You'll have a drink. We put up some special whisky, as Poin-dexter can tell you."

Werner had said nothing so far, but with a grim and resolute face had rumbled after the other villain.

There was no sign of any military precautions in the whole place; it was a camp of ease. I wondered.

Houston bade us sit, and called out to one of his men, who presently produced a bottle and tin pannikins.

"The best of this climate and altitude," said Houston generally, "is that spirits do you no harm. Here's how!"

"How!" said Werner, with his tin mug half-way to his mouth. "Now, that started from an Injun, didn't it? But it's got a different bearing now. It may mean a lot of things — how are you going to do — how are you going to get out of it — how are you likely to die — oh, Houston, there's a lot of sarcasm or irony or what you call it, in that 'how!'"

"Possibly!" said Houston, at his beard again. "We're all the slave of forms of conventions. Anyway, to our next merry meeting! Wasn't there an old jape — 'when shall we three meet again?'"

He looked almost slyly at me as he spoke, and I was feeling the Mauser under my hand.

"I guess what's there, and I won't call you," he said, with cynical assurance. "Werner, here's the one man that wants my blood, and I look to you to defend me."

"Your next stop's Kingdom Come," said Werner savagely.

Houston looked pained. "My dear fellow, this is getting quite absurd," said he. "I've explained to you before why it can't be. You make me tired. If you want it again, however, I'll have to dot the i's, I reckon. So here begins the tale of a box, which I don't think you have heard before, though doubtless Poindexter's told you the tale of another. However,

there are boxes and boxes. Have I your leave to proceed? Poindexter, you leave your liquor, excellent liquor, I believe, selected by yourself."

"Go ahead!" said Werner, scowling.

Houston leaned back, as if he enjoyed the narration.

"I confess I've been disappointed about this latest development," he said, with the air of a philosophic bystander. "I reckoned on being hidden for a sufficient time to wear you out. I reckoned without your well-known nature, Werner, — it's dogged as does it, you know — and, let us say, chance. Anyway, here you are, and I'm privileged to entertain you."

Werner stirred impatiently.

"Quit the drawing-room," he said, "and come out on the veranda."

"You want my tale?" said Houston, smiling. "You shall have it. As you have probably been informed by the excellent but importunate and foolish Poindexter, I ran our friend, the aged priest, to earth. I was guilty of a slight exaggeration when I informed you that I held him. I did not, but I had every reason for supposing that I should in due course, by the exercise of patience and other virtues."

The ineffable ruffian smiled at us blandly, as if no guilt or taint of blood were on his long, slim hands.

"The priest, on the occasion of our first interview, proved, I regret to say, intractable. The fact is, he held extravagant notions as to the value of the box in question, from a religious point of view." Houston paused. "He knew nothing of it from any

other point of view," he said gently. "He refused to part with his information and disclose its hiding-place, though I assured him I was a legitimate emissary from Don Ramon, whom he remembered with respect. But the fact is, he was a fanatic, and in some way the box was associated in his weakened intelligence with the Incas, and his ancestors, and the worship of his sacred god, otherwise the sun. So he beat it."

Houston contemplated us now without a smile, but placidly.

"Well, the box turned out to hold what I wanted. I don't know that there's any more to tell."

"You're sitting on a keg of dynamite, Houston," said Werner, "and have n't the sense to see it."

Houston shrugged his shoulders. "Do you kill the goose who lays the golden eggs, or could lay them? No. You're not a fool, Werner. Who knows where the Big Fish is? One man only in this blooming sphere, and that's me! Oh, you're not a fool."

"This box," said Werner, with heavy signs of excitement on him, "did it explain precisely the locality where the Fish is?"

"To a nicety; Poindexter could n't trig it better himself."

What made the callous creature recall that episode with his light sneer I do not know; but I know that I rose maddened. It was of no account to me that Houston's secret should die with him. I made a rush, but with amazing agility for one of his build, Werner thrust himself between, and I broke myself

upon his square, tough frame as it had been upon a rock.

"Steady, fool!" he said. "You're not fit to have a weapon, and more by token there's no cartridge in it."

Houston stood where he was, and apparently had not turned a hair; but I saw his hand moving gently in his pocket. I fell back chagrined, humiliated.

"What are you going to do?" asked Werner bluntly of him.

Houston examined his nails. "It's really for you to say," he said modestly. "I only thought that the situation was ripe for a conference."

"You want to make terms?" said Werner, blowing like a porpoise.

"Isn't the boot on the other leg?" asked Houston. "Or let us say we both would be advantaged by a mutual agreement."

There was a pause. "By God, man, who'd trust you?" burst forth Werner.

His face was red to purple; his skin tightened over it, and he labored with his breath as though under the stress of a huge emotion. Houston was imperturbable and cool.

"It is a matter for discussion, surely," he said. "The resources of civilization, as an eminent man once said, are not exhausted."

At that word I could have laughed with loud irony. Civilization! The man's impudence was triumphant. As I stared, I developed a grin, a grin which seemed to move him also to reciprocity. He laughed gently. I could see these two scoundrels united soon in an

unholy alliance, their mutual enmities forgotten, and dividing the plunder on the proportionate methods of some joint stock company or corporation. It was I who spoke now, and the evenness of my voice was a surprise to myself.

"What this man Houston means is apparent, Werner," I said, "and I have no doubt you will be ready to discuss it with him. He wants a deal."

Both men looked at me, and Houston showed his teeth in a familiar grin.

"A Daniel come to judgment!" he said. "That's on the nail fair and square. Does Poindexter come in?"

Werner paid no heed; it was evident that he was deep in thought.

"I also want to come to an understanding with you, Werner," I went on, quietly enough. "I've been an appanage to your party so far, of no consequence. I want you to understand that this can't go on. I want you to understand that I claim this man's life; it belongs to me. If you contract out of the venedetta, you may; I remain in."

Houston was agrin, but Werner's face was stolid, though he had paid me the tribute of attention at last.

"What do you reckon you're going to do?" he asked, with some contempt in his voice.

"Look upon me as a discontented shareholder," I replied, still keeping my tones quiet and even. "I give you notice."

Werner turned to Houston. "Well, what's your proposition?" he asked bluntly.

“Speaking in general, a pool on terms to be settled,” said Houston. “The shares to be determined by mutual agreement and discussion. Bear in mind that I hold the trumps. It’s in my power to turn down the quest this day, and to go back to the coast. I only know where the Fish is, and my knowledge would perish with me. But I confess, I’d like to handle the stuff. I’ve gone through more than a bit for it, and I don’t fancy turning back with the key in my hand. That’s why I’m willing to come to terms. But you must remember these facts in the terms.”

I don’t know if Werner liked this, and I judged from his sardonic scowl that he was debating within himself, but when he spoke it was decisive.

“Very well. I’m willing to come in on terms, but, my son, they must be considerably my terms. And I’ll tell you just why. I could, and may, blow a hole in your carcass, but in that case I’d be merely indulging my own personal feelings. I’m as reluctant to give up as you are, but I think I can squeeze you. The fact is, Houston, you’re undermanned, which, when you come to think of it, is a poetic justice. If you had n’t thrown out Poindexter and Co. you’d have stood a better chance. See for yourself what a fire-eater this Poindexter is.”

I paid no heed to the sally. Both these men, I knew, ignored, contemned me, treated me as negligible in this wilderness. I cared nothing. What was occupying my mind was a parallel. How long ago—years, was it? since, seated at a table with the same bland smile, cornered and trapped as he was

trapped to-day, had Houston made terms with us, as he was making terms with Werner, and snatched victory out of the jaws of defeat? Was he destined to repeat his triumph? I confess I did not see how. It was a choice for him now of throwing up all hope of the treasure or of accepting Werner's terms. And yet I seemed certain that he would wriggle out at the last moment. Surely, Werner, with his frank brutality and roughshod ways, was no match for this crafty rogue, whom he appeared to have at his mercy. The haggling caught my attention, and I knew it.

They had no care that I was present to listen; as I have said, I was negligible to them, about of as much significance as the surroundings, rocks and bushes. Suddenly it grew horribly galling, the knowledge that I was so despised. In civilization, in the heart of the world, in roaring cities, and under conditions in which man was wont mostly to live, I should be recognized as more or less an intelligent, superior person with education, brains and capacities. In the company of these rogues I was a cypher who had passed out of the game. The haggling arrested me, I say, and I knew as I listened to it that Werner was lost. Houston made no fight, or a very poor pretence of one.

"If you press your advantage too far, you will kill the golden goose," he protested.

I remembered how he had argued with Cassilis and myself in the drawing-room of the bungalow by the river.

"I won't squeeze the orange quite dry," said

Werner, choosing his own figure, "but damn me if I don't squeeze it some. If you paid in full, you'd pay all, curse you."

"What am I to pay?" inquired the other, with a lightness which to me was suspicious.

"There are five of us. You shall cut out with a twenty-fifth," said Werner.

Houston lifted his long hands in elegant protest. "My dear sir, it's robbery," he said in dismay.

"It's a handsome present," said Werner, sourly agrin. "If you'd played straight you would have shared, one of five. Now you take four parts in a hundred, and leave us the balance."

"It's a tidy sum for five honest paupers," said Houston meditatively. "But if it's not a rude question, what might be the proportion to be allotted to yourself, Werner?"

"I guess I'll get paid for my services," grinned Werner. "I'm president of this bank."

"It can't be done, my friend." Houston shook his head.

How I knew that light tone, and how it roused in me a fury, ill-contained.

Werner contemplated him with the air of one who is master and merciful. "Damn it, man, as it's my birthday, I'll make it a twentieth. Better agree with me while I am in the gate, as they say in the Bible somewhere. For I may be feeling different an hour hence."

Houston shrugged his shoulders. "Five points out of the hundred! It's flaying a man," he said. "Well, I accept. Have another drink."

Werner got upon his legs, a broad, squat, ugly figure, like some dangerous and exotic insect of monstrous size. His small eyes were gleaming with excitement.

"I'll drink to the joint account!" he said, with a sudden change of tone. "Here's to the Adventure!"

The two men moved aside and conversed together; it seemed as if in that second they had joined forces, and were amicable allies. I saw Houston jerk his hand upward as if indicating a direction, and Werner's voice, intense and low and raw, rumbled on, though I could not hear what he said. Houston nodded, and Werner picked his way toward me, for I was in the way, toward the exit from the savage dingle. For a short distance I was in front of Werner, but just as we entered the thickest part of the scrub, he drew level with me.

I started and swung round at the report of a gun, and realized that a bullet had glanced off the bush near me. Werner turned about also.

"What the —" He paused, and then: "Better get along, Poindexter," he said, with a grin. "That was meant for you."

"Why not for you?" I asked, as the bushes closed behind us.

"Why, the man's not a fool, is he? He knows he'd be eaten up if anything like that happened. I hold him all round."

"For me!" I echoed.

"Yes, I believe he's a bit nervous about you. I really do."

He laughed; and I think I also smiled. For, odd as it may seem to you, I was glad — I rejoiced. The man did not, then, account me as nothing; he was afraid of me. That was balm to my spirit. I exulted in the thought. He would have shot me in my tracks to get rid of me. And this was the third time! I knew somehow that I was not born to be a victim to Houston. I revelled in the fears his action had betrayed.

CHAPTER XV

AN AMAZING DEVELOPMENT

WERNER'S attitude toward me was curious. I think, while he displayed indifference, he felt amiable, so far as in him lay. It is certain that he was astonished by Houston's attempt at assassination. I do not flatter myself that he would have resisted a bargain in which my life was concerned. He would have cheerfully handed me over to Houston if it had been necessary as a make-weight. I can conceive him saying with his cynical grin: "I'll throw Poindexter in."

But there was no deal in which my name was concerned. I think, perhaps, that Houston believed he had me at his mercy when he wished, and that he might as well amuse himself in the meanwhile. I don't know; I never knew. But as I had something still to effect in life, it was my duty to take precautions for my safety. I was still unarmed, for, as Werner had revealed, the cartridges were blank. I immediately used the incident in the bushes as a plea for the return of my weapon. Werner bluntly refused.

"You can keep out of sight," he said. "I don't give a damn for what you do afterwards; but I'm not going to have Houston knocked out just now;

he's the cat for the chestnuts. After that he's yours, or you're his — which way you come out of it."

However, I was to get my ammunition, as you will see.

It was the middle of the afternoon when we found Houston, but no move was made during the rest of the day. Houston and Werner had a second conference, at which I was not present, and I have no doubt that they came to some detailed agreement. It became understood among the adventurers that we were to make a start at daybreak, and in the meantime a careful watch was set. Now Werner's party included several pure-blooded Indians as well as some mestizos, and, so far as I had observed, all went in fear of their leader. He had only to command to be obeyed. The Indians were for the most part simple fellows like all their kin in those parts, but among the mestizos were some bolder and less scrupulous spirits. None of these men were admitted to any part in the rewards of the adventure; they were paid servants merely, and probably knew nothing of the quest on which their masters were embarked. English was the language of the white men; the others spoke Spanish.

It was a clear, white night, and very cold, and it was the cold that woke me, under my inadequate coverings. I got up and walked about to warm myself. A little way off I saw a man's figure seated, and he lifted his head, rose, and came towards me. It was Miguel. When he recognized me, he spat and turned away with an oath. I stretched myself, and

walked away from the tents and fires. There was no law now to keep me in the camp. I was harmless.

I picked my way among the boulders in the trough of the ravine, and, ten minutes later, was alone on the mountain-side. Suddenly I saw a tiny spark of light, which twinkled and went out. I stared, and again it flashed and faded.

I seemed to know what this was, and I wondered. It was for all the world as if a man had been lighting a cigarette in the night. Who was there?

I went forward cautiously, using the rocks as cover, until I must have got within fifty yards of the spot in which the light had appeared. It was a white night, as I have said, but it was impossible to determine more than shadows in it. I seemed to see shadows of men, crouched in the rocks, but I had almost set the thing down to fancy when again a match flared, and lighted up the face of Diego, Houston's right-hand and rascally instrument. It lighted up another face also, which I recognized on the flash as Indian.

The situation puzzled me, and set my wits working. Houston's camp was carefully guarded and watched. How did Diego come here, and what was he doing? I withdrew, debating these questions, and finding no solution, and, as I drew near the dingle which held Houston's camp, I was tempted to explore, despite the risk I should run at those savage hands.

Werner had not entrusted the responsible part of the guard to Indians, but had set Maddock in charge of the sentries, as I was aware. Yet no sign of

Maddock was to be found, nor was there any evidence of the sentries. I pushed my way carefully into the scrub, and reached the inner circle where the camp had been. It was empty!

I scrambled back with a heart beating wildly, for I knew my time was come. Werner was only a strong fool; and Houston had cheated him, as he had cheated me. I raced down to our camp, and found Miguel sitting by the fire.

"Where 's Maddock?" I asked.

I understood him to curse me and Maddock also. I left him, and went to Werner's tent. The man slept like a hog, and his snoring saluted me.

"Give me my cartridges," I cried, much as I had said before. "Wake, man!" and I shook him.

He sat up, and I was conscious of a pistol between us.

"Werner, you 're done brown. You 're euchred!" I shouted. "Houston 's off. Give me those cartridges."

He stumbled up. "What?" he said, and tore open the flap of canvas which formed the door of the tent.

"Houston 's gone!" I said.

He stalked out.

"Where are the cartridges?" I shouted.

"Behind the holster," he said, as he went.

And that was how I got my arms, and became once more a man to be considered.

I ran out after Werner, who was giving orders, and I poured out my story. The camp was deserted! Houston was gone! But what of Diego? Beating

to quarters gave us an inkling of the case. There were absent three mestizos, and Houston's camp was, as I knew, silence. That was the first thing to claim Werner's attention. The two mestizos who had been with Maddock had disappeared, as also the one Indian. Maddock was discovered in the scrub unconscious, with an ugly knife-wound in his side. I guessed at things now, and I was hot for the chase.

"You will find the Indian up the valley," I told Werner. "Come! If you can wait, I can't."

But I did not do him justice. The preparations were already made, and the mule pack was moving even as I spoke. We were seven men short, including Maddock, who was provided with a litter after his wound had been rudely dressed. Seven men short! It was like Houston to strike that unexpected blow. Werner's silence was charged with terror. Up the valley I halted by the rocks where I had seen Diego, and, as I had imagined, there was the body of the Indian, poor, faithful creature, who had refused to betray his trust. I knew what had happened. Houston had got rid of Maddock, and bought over the mestizos. Probably for the first time they had heard of the treasure. At any rate, five had deserted us, and Houston's party was now superior in strength.

Werner moved forward at a terrific rate, for it was not difficult to guess in what direction the others had fled. The dawn came fast, and surprised us on the march. Just then Miguel, who had been sent forward to reconnoiter, returned excitedly, and conversed with his associates. I heard Maddock groaning on the litter. Houston had been located. The

odds were against us, but Werner did not hesitate. The last half-mile was covered, and Houston pushed his head out of the scrub to look at us. It was evidently a surprise to him, but he promptly disappeared, and I heard him shout to his men. Werner stood exposed in front of his party, gun in hand, as if waiting. Jeff was behind, under the cover of a rock. The mestizos could be seen in a knot together, and Houston's voice was evidently urging them, for it was sharp and angry. Werner raised his gun.

"Come back, you dogs!" he shouted like a bull, and a mestizo advanced and paused, and sighted along his rifle.

Werner fired, and the man dropped. "I'll count twenty," he shouted, "and if you're not back then, I'll wipe you out. Shoot, Houston; why the h— don't you shoot?"

Jeff swore horribly. "He knows I've got a bead on him," he said. "If he moves he's dead."

The mass of Houston's Indians remained unmoved, taking no part in this curious scene, but watching with a blank and stolid interest. The affair had dwindled down to a question of the mestizos. They wavered. Houston's angry voice was audible, but he did not move after Jeff's threat. Werner's dominating bulk and personality, the personality of a master whom they knew, and whose wrath they had felt, turned the scale, no less than the dead man on the ground. In a broken string they shambled away from Houston and toward their old leader. Werner's brute courage had triumphed.

Houston was beaten, but he never showed a sign

of discomfort. In the gray, cold dawn, baffled, worsted, and undoubtedly with the fires of hate in his heart, he came forward with a grin.

"I guess you nearly arrived too late, Werner," he said. "However, it's only a quarter of a mile farther on. Let's get a move on us."

His impudence and assurance were superb, and even I, with all the reasons I had for loathing this man, could not but regard him with some admiration. Werner said nothing at the moment, but moved forward quickly. The sweat rolled down his face, and it was wild and blazing.

"Get!" he said, when he reached Houston, "and, by heaven, you'll be in Kingdom Come in three seconds if you play false again."

"I had no luck," said Houston mildly. "Perhaps, after all, the joint account is the better solution."

The procession moved almost in silence across the hillside, and all eyes were on Houston when he came to a pause. He seemed to pass us all in review, as if summing us up.

"Werner, I have no guarantee after this," he said slowly. "For all I know, the next steps I take seal my fate."

His fingers were twitching, for the man was obviously earnest, and was obviously also laboring under excitement. Werner uttered an oath, for he could contain himself less than his enemy.

"For all I'm concerned, I swear by any oath you like that I shall have no knowledge of your existence when we've finished," he said. "What's more, none of my men shall touch you."

Houston was silent a moment, and then an ugly smile contorted his face.

"I accept your statement. You always kept faith, Werner. But outside your men you can't promise. I think I'll make sure."

He was standing sideways to me, and he twirled swiftly about on his heel. But somehow I had an anticipation of his act in my mind. I dropped as he fired, and I dropped behind a stone. Ere he or I could follow up this treacherous act, Werner had stepped between. He was in a state of dreadful emotion, and looked gross and antic, like the god Mammon.

"Enough!" he said. "Go on, or I'll shoot you myself."

Houston moved upward, slowly, with his eyes now looking on the ground, and now scanning the outlying features of the landscape. He stopped again, and his face worked, and I knew he had forgotten me and his danger. If I had shot him then I should have drawn upon myself the vengeance of that dehumanized gang. Besides, I wanted him to face and see Death.

"Twenty paces from the stone," he said, almost in a whisper.

Werner rushed forward, and Houston darted past him. A cry rose on the air. When I reached them in the tail of the party, Werner was staring at an open cavity in the earth.

"My God!" said Houston in a low voice. "My God!"

Suddenly Werner turned on him. "You've rifled

it, by thunder," and struck at him with his clubbed hand.

In that maddened and infuriated onslaught, Houston must have seen the surety of an immediate death, for behind Werner, with menacing looks and ugly cries, were his partners in that desperate enterprise. He backed, and called out loudly.

"Fool! Do you suppose I should have brought you here and risked this certainty? Oh, you sot of an ass! Be a man and keep your senses!"

His voice rang out plainly to all, and the insistence of his logic stayed even Werner in his frenzy. The blow had fallen on nothing but air.

"Some one's rifled it! Some one's been here before," said Werner, with vacant fury.

Houston sprang down into the cavity, and began to examine it. The whole place was like a tumbled surface of holes and mounds, resembling earth from which ironstone or flint had been extracted. It had been weathered by many suns and rains, as was apparent at a glance.

"This took place long ago," said Houston presently, in a hoarse voice. "Probably a year ago."

And at that the same thought fell upon all of us, and was uttered by Werner.

"Raymond!"

Houston's brow was black like thunder, and his whole countenance was ravaged with some passion to which, nevertheless, he did not give vent.

"Raymond!" he whispered back.

Werner uttered an oath, and Jeff made the cliffs ring with the foulness of his outbreak. But Houston

alone was silent, exploring, examining, scrutinizing the broken ground about.

Suddenly Werner turned and gave some order to Jeff in an undertone, and both men separated from the knot, and stalked toward the wondering Indians. At a word the mestizos also drew off, and the men set about pitching camp in a hollow. Houston was left digging with his followers, and from time to time I saw him look toward the others as if in mute interrogation of their attitude.

What that was developed in due course. Werner had been seized with a suspicion; he knew that traitorous heart, and he believed that Houston was at one more of his tricks. I, who had seen the passion on the man's face, knew better, but Werner swore by all the gods that Houston had betrayed him again, and that this was not the place where the Fish had been cached. Only death was payment enough for the man who should so betray, but they dared not kill Houston, so long as there was a hope of obtaining the secret. As for me, I was indifferent. I reflected that my opportunity was near, long waited for. I should meet Houston face to face, and settle my account with him. I did not care whether they found the treasure or not. I laughed inwardly at their chagrin, and watched them with detached interest. There was something ominous in the silence. Werner sat in his tent and did nothing, and Houston was busy in the rifled cache. Something brooded in the air, which was full of storm. Toward afternoon I went to Werner.

"Will you give me this man now?" I asked.

He looked at me, lowering. "What do you want?" he asked. "I can't be bothered with such as you at this time."

"I ask this because we are outside the law here," I said. "No writ runs in this outland place. Justice must be done, if at all, by private hands. This man's life belongs to me. Will you give it to me?"

"No," said he bluntly.

I left him, for I knew I should get what I wanted, though I might wait all the afternoon. Houston was digging — digging in the refuse sand, but now digging with lessening hope, and a greater consciousness of the outside world. The area of the disturbed ground was considerable. It was patchy, like the excavated foundations of a Roman encampment on some ancient soil. I looked on, and I don't think Houston noticed me. Indeed, I am sure he did not. If I had wanted any other evidence of his bona fides in the matter of this cache, here it was; he pursued his work with such abstracted eagerness that he did not even recognize his enemy. Yet he flagged slowly. While skirting the circumference of this area, I stumbled over a stone, and my boot displaced it. In the descending fire of the sun something gleamed on the opened earth. I stooped, and picked it up. It was a precious stone. As I contemplated it I laughed. Was I the only one to inherit the sole relic of the Incas' treasure? I wiped it on my coat-sleeve and polished it. The gem shone in the sunset, discharging fires at me. It was a beautiful ruby. When I looked up, Houston had ceased and was staring at me from a distance of forty yards. I think he came back in

that moment to a realization. He stared, and put his hand instinctively into his pocket. I turned away. The time was not yet ripe.

I found Werner in the gloaming sitting before his tent, and I knew from his look that he had reached a determination. Storm was in the air. I have never known what the man had decided upon, but I have guessed it, from what he had said and done previously, and also — well, that is to come. You remember his introduction of Torquemada. I am glad now that I was the cause that blocked this horrible act of his, if it was that he contemplated, though if I had known it at the time, in those mad hours of mine, I would have stepped aside and seen a terrible justice done that way. Werner's face wore a heavy scowl.

"Is n't there room enough in the mountains?" he asked angrily.

"Not for me and this man," I said.

"By thunder, don't you understand he's mine, not yours?" stormed Werner.

"See here, Werner," I said, "you have some plan about Houston arranged on the supposition that he's been cheating you over the Fish."

He growled; that was all.

"Well, if I can prove that he is innocent, if I can show you that he has led you genuinely to the site of the old cache, will you give me this man?"

After a pause his answer came.

"If you can prove that, — yes. You can have him to shoot, burn or hang."

"Very well"; and of a sudden I exposed the jewel in my open palm.

He clutched at it greedily.

"Where did you get this from?" he asked.

"From the site where Houston is digging," I replied.

"Has he found any?" he cried eagerly.

"I don't know," I said, "but if he has found anything it won't be much. The place, as you saw, has been gone over. But this ruby only testifies to one thing, — that treasure was buried there once. Houston has played fair at last. Now I want him."

For a moment he did not answer, but fingered the jewel, as he considered the new fact and its inferences.

"Yes, you can do what you like," he said at last, morosely. "We've all played and lost," and he turned and went into his tent with the ruby.

I walked away from him and the camp. Houston had gone from the trenches at which he and his men had been working, and night was falling swiftly. I stood with the cold wind from the peaks snapping about me, and looked down at the figures in the dusk which were setting up tents. The farce was over, and the game was played out for all these men. As I looked, I saw the unmistakable square frame of Werner lurching across the gully towards Houston's rising tents. The two rivals were equal in defeat, and might mingle their tears or their oaths for all that I cared. I had a strange mood. My enemy was there, exposed to my vengeance, and in the satisfaction of that knowledge I rested. Thoughts that had been absent from my mind for weeks flowed back into it, at first in dribblets, as it were, and then in full

volume. I turned and descended into a trough of the Sierra. Houston would wait.

The valley here was less austere and more gracious than most of the country. It was scattered with trees and scrub; birds flitted in it; and a mountain torrent frothed along it from the heights above. I walked in the shades of evening as if in a garden, in a mist of my own thoughts. I reviewed the whole fortunes of the venture in which Cassilis and I had so recklessly engaged, from the first moment when I had stepped out of the rainstorm into the auction room, and so fortuitously changed fate. I imaged Houston in the chair at the bungalow, his white teeth and ingratiating smile, his specious and reasonable argument. I followed the vicissitudes of the expedition with Coop, the strange encounter with the ladies, the horrid treachery of Houston, Werner's gang — and suddenly all human things and counselings and aspirations and ambitions seem to me very small and insignificant. Under the wonder of the stars now shining above me it was impossible not to see our world in its proper proportions. We were ants in an ant-hill, going about in a fuss on some business or other, encountering, crossing antennæ, communicating vaguely with one another, misunderstanding, blundering, worrying, obeying the imperfect instincts of our imperfect natures. And suddenly to that succeeded the thought that the old Scripture was right, that Miss Varley was right also, and that the vengeance I sought was perhaps not mine to exact. I cannot say how long I wandered in the valley contending with these thoughts, but I

remember that as I did so something seemed to roll off my soul and leave me free. I would go back to my world, and whatsoever the laws of his world might require of Houston, that he should pay. But, as for myself, I would stand aside, abandon my mission, and ask pardon for my arrogance.

I mused in a more cheerful mood, which warmed with the release of my burden as I made my way back to the camp. The night was clear, and when I was drawing near the confines of Houston's camp I was startled to see the body of a man lying on the rocks upon his side. It was an Indian, and he was dead. I did not recognize him as belonging to either Werner's or Houston's outfit, and I wondered, with a renewal of bitterness, if the hapless man had been a straggler from the native villages below, wantonly shot by the white men with whom I was associated.

I left him and climbed the rise, skirted Houston's camp, and crossed the small gully which separated it from Werner's. In the firelight I saw a group of figures standing, and evidently awaiting me. As I got nearer, I discovered Werner and Houston side by side, and close by Jeff and others. Ere my recognition could go farther, I was hailed.

"I guess we want you some, Poindexter," said Werner, "as kind of interpreter."

I stared, for I had come among them now.

"We've each done a bit of reading, Poindexter," said Houston smiling. "It's your turn now."

"I understand nothing of what you're saying," I replied curtly.

Werner lifted a hand, and I saw it held a piece of paper.

“Give me a light, Jeff,” he commanded.

Jeff lit a torch from the fire, and thrust it over me, and under the shower of light and sparks I read a pencil note in an unknown hand as follows:

“MY DEAR FRIEND: It has occurred to me that I ought to have told you before this — that what those men seek (not you now, I know) is not where it is supposed to be, but has been removed. It came upon me suddenly that it might concern you to know this. I don’t know why. If it is of advantage to you, I shall be glad. I am sending this by one of my Indians. We are still camped where you found us.

Sincerely yours,

MERCEDES VARLEY.”

CHAPTER XVI

MERCEDES

A RUSH of cold fear mingled in my heart with the fury which gushed forth and overwhelmed all other emotions in its broad torrent. I looked at the ruffians.

"Well?" I said. "It seems that some one has been making free with my property."

"Oh, that was one of Houston's men. Smart man, Diego!" said Werner. "But that's not interesting. It's past history. We want you to interpret the enigma."

"I have grown so accustomed to murder as a daily recreation," I said slowly, "that I suppose I should feel no surprise at mere theft."

"Mere borrowing, Poindexter," amended Houston, in a deprecatory voice. "We have scrupulously returned the billet-doux, as you will notice, and we should be much obliged for the address."

"Good Lord, man, so you suppose I'm going to tell you *that*?" I asked contemptuously.

"I have every hope and confidence that you will," said Houston gently.

I laughed. "I thought you were a clever, discerning scoundrel, but I find you merely a scoundrel."

Werner broke in roughly. "Look here, we're in no humor to wait and bandy wits here. You've got to say where the lady is. That's the long and short of it. Now!"

I turned to him. "Do you remember an old proverb, Werner: 'One man may lead a horse to the water, but twenty cannot make him drink'?"

"I guess we'll try," he snarled.

Houston leaned to him and whispered something, and I turned to go; but the next moment I was down upon the ground, tripped up, knocked over by Jeff and a mestizo.

"No; I'll give it the chance," I heard Werner say to something his companion urged. "When I'm pressed I don't mind, but I don't do it for the love of it."

I had struggled ineffectively, and was now a prisoner in the hands of my captors. At a word from Werner, I was taken to a tent, bound with ropes and left to my own reflections. There I lay for some hours, until well into the night, a prey to miserable thoughts, hearing the sounds of the camp, of coming and going, and watching the glare of the flames of the fires on the canvas. Toward midnight I fell asleep, and woke with the dawn, hungry and stiff, and above all thirsty. Werner pushed aside the flap and entered shortly afterward.

"Are you going to loose your tongue, my son?" he asked gruffly.

"No," I answered shortly.

He sat down. "Look here, Poindexter. This girl somehow knows something. What she wrote you

isn't bluff or fluff. She's serious. She has got information somehow of the Big Fish and knows it was removed. Maybe, by thunder, she's removed it herself," he said suddenly, as if to himself. "I never quite swallowed the botany tale. Anyway, we're out for the Fish, and we've got to get it. *Comprenez?* And you'd better make the best of the job by letting us know where the lady's camp is. I give my oath no harm shall happen to her. We just want a quiet talk with her."

"Supposing," said I, "that she refuses you the information you want, providing, that is, she has it?"

"We won't suppose anything of the kind," said he bluntly, "any more than we'll suppose that you won't open your mouth."

"Well, suppose I don't?" I asked defiantly.

"You won't be such a fool, Poindexter," he said slowly.

"You make me tired," I said. "Do you think as a man I'm going to give away a woman for you to harry? My God, what sort of thing do you take me for? I never realized before the exact baseness of the company I am keeping, who could imagine *that!*"

He stalked out. "I'll give you till this evening," he said as he left.

I knew why I was left that much grace, for it was evident that the scouts were out in all directions, and what I feared was that one would chance upon Miss Varley's camp. Werner, however, relieved my fears on this score later in the day. When he visited me toward evening, it was evident from his face that

they had failed to locate the camp; and his first words confirmed my impression.

"You've had time to digest the situation, Poin-dexter," he said; "so I've come for your answer."

"You've had it," I replied.

"I'll add this much before I accept it," he said. "It's absolutely impossible for the girl to escape our search. We're bound to run her to earth; so that all you will be doing will be hurrying up the process, which might be a good thing all round, if you regard it properly."

"There is only one answer," I replied, "and you have had it."

"You refuse information?" he said heavily.

"I refuse."

"Then the Lord have mercy on you," he said fiercely, "for I won't."

He went out, and I heard his voice raised, and shortly afterwards two mestizos entered the tent, and raised me as I was, bound with ropes and cords, and carried me out into the open. The sun was gone, and twilight was approaching, the brief, untender twilight of those latitudes. Far off, far down in the mists which swam about the grave of the sun, stretched the sea and civilization. Here were the mountains and savagery. "Feels a bit cold, don't it?" said Werner. "Never mind, there are ways to better that."

He strode away, and I heard the rumble of his voice in the distance. Next came a couple of Indians armed with bundles of brushwood and dried grass, with which they replenished the fire. I had been

laid upon the ground near by, and the access of warmth in that cold night was agreeable to me, so that I forgot for a time even the cords about me. Werner came up again and looked down on me, and I was conscious that there were other figures regarding me, though the dancing fire partially hid them.

“Comfortable?” he asked, and grinned.

By that time the fire had gained strength and volume, and I was beginning to feel it scorch my legs. Werner called to some one in the background, and Miguel emerged out of the murk, stooped, and took off my boots. Werner kicked the fire. It shot up, and the flame seized and singed my naked feet and ankles. I gave a cry of pain. Werner grinned. There was something tossing in the current of my mind — a word was it? — a name — Ah, Torquemada!

“You ’ll give us that information, Poindexter?”

I heard the sound of the voice through pain.

“No,” I said raucously. “I ’ll see you in H — first.”

“No fear; I ’m clearing out of it,” he said grimly, and marched off, leaving me to the endurance of that growing agony.

I don’t like to resume the full memory of that next hour. It was what Werner had by inference called it. It was Hell. As the fire gained force and spread toward me, the pangs became excruciating. It scorched and singed and shrivelled; it seemed to dry up the blood within me, to the accompaniment of insufferable torments. The flame played

on the tender surfaces of the body, causing actions and reactions that made me writhe in my bonds. I screamed out.

Werner returned and stood looking at me, and I think I must have cursed him in my pain. There were voices mingling, but I was too greatly distracted to realize anything that might be in progress. I remember vaguely muttering "no" to Werner's question. My eyes closed. I felt him stoop and look at me. He was gone when I opened my eyes again. My feet were molten pain; a sword was in my groin. I could not move. I lifted my voice to call Werner and could not. There was no volume in it. I had given up. Werner might have all the treasure in the world. I did not care. Gold mattered nothing to me, nor jewels; honor did n't matter. Nothing mattered save intolerable pain. I closed my eyes again, while something I recollected far back from a book flowed into my brain. I did not know where it came from; it was simply a sentence retained by memory in its agony — "When it reaches my heart I shall die." You will remember it was what Socrates said when he had taken the poison. That was how I felt about the fire. The heat, which was like ice, was mounting. When it reached my heart I should die. I was falling into a stupor of pain — I was the pain itself; it was me. There was nothing else.

Suddenly I was aware of a sharp feeling in another region, near my shoulder. I opened my eyes with what was intended for a cry, for while the tract of pain below had become part of me, this

was an assault in a fresh quarter. I saw weakly what had happened. A brand from the fire had flown out and alighted on me. It burned hard and fierce through my clothing, and I shrank from it, and then, to my astonishment, my shoulder eased and broke through the cordage. The brand had burned this through with my coat. I found now that I could move my right arm, and very slowly and with great difficulty I disengaged it and set to work on the rest of the web.

It took me nearly a quarter of an hour to clear myself, and each moment I was afraid that Werner or some other of the gang would return. But apparently he intended that this dose of torture should be final as an argument, and that I should yield to it; and he had purposely protracted it. I drew up my wounded feet and bathed them in the cold sand. They scorched so that I could have screamed aloud. But I held myself in check, and bit by bit worked myself away. I could hear sounds of the gang, as they ate and drank fifty paces away, but the smoke of the fire partially clouded their view of their prisoner. At last I dared to get to my feet, and, like a stricken animal, limped away behind the fire towards the gully.

To this day I don't know if I should have escaped but for the accident that Werner had hobbled his mules on the farther side of the fire in some scrub. I was guided to them blunderingly and, cutting the hobbles with my knife, I appropriated one for my use. I was in instant fear lest any commotion among the beasts should betray me, a fear as terrible as

that of Werner's return to the fire. But I succeeded in mounting the mule without disturbing its companions, and I turned its head into the gully. How I prayed to God that the night would swallow me up! And I believe that in some way there was a response to that heartfelt prayer; for the sky, which had been fairly light, clouded presently, and fell blacker, so that I scarcely could tell in what direction I was going. I had a vague sense of where I was heading; it was to the uplands where the peak stood up beside the dawn; but I knew no more, and I wandered at a venture, trusting only in my weakness to some higher and merciful Power.

That did not fail me. I believe that at times I was unconscious, as my mule jogged on. I set my course as best I could at intervals when I woke. I ate nothing; I had eaten nothing all day, and I drank from the pools and torrents in the valleys. I must have been blundering on for many hours without a knowledge of how time was passing, only conscious of pain and weariness and cold, for that which had suffered agonies from heat was now exposed to the other extreme. The night wind was like a knife, but I blessed it. It blew over, round, and, as it seemed to me, through a free man. The early gray of the dawn found me still wandering on the mountains, and I fell into one of my unconscious states. It was in this swoon that I entered Miss Varley's camp, guided thither by Manuel, who had encountered me by accident while he was reconnoitering. My earliest recollection is that my feet were being laved in a gentle warmth, and that some one was applying medi-

caments to the swollen flesh. I believe my first words were banal and formal.

"I'm sorry to be a nuisance." Then I saw that it was Miss Varley. "I got your note," I said, with equal banality. She stopped for a moment in her work, and regarded me, I thought, pitifully.

"What have they done to you?" she cried. "Oh, what have they done to you?"

"I'm glad," I said stumbly, "I'm so glad." It was foolish, incredibly foolish, but I could n't help it. I *was* glad; glad to see her there bending over my feet and tending me with solicitude. And then, suddenly, I was ashamed, and made as if to stand up. But she stopped me.

"No, no, you must n't — you can't, you dare n't."

I gazed at her face, over which the glorious hair had loosened and spread. This was no longer my Queen of the Snows, but my Lady of Pity.

"They killed the messenger," I blurted out.

"Yes; I was afraid something had happened, as he did n't return." She looked up at me. "That was why Manuel went out. He was anxious as to what might be happening. I — we were anxious when we did not hear from you."

"You have saved my life again," I said. "You and Manuel."

She stood up to her full height. "Tell me how this happened," she said in another voice, one of command, of authority. She pointed to my feet.

"It was the system of Torquemada," I said, with a faint smile.

She was silent a moment, and then said slowly:

"You say they killed poor Juan. Then they must have got the letter."

I said nothing.

"I see," she exclaimed, with a great bitterness. "This is what happened," and suddenly she sobbed out passionately: "Oh, that you should have suffered this because of my folly! Oh, that you should have had —" she hid her face in her hands, and her body was convulsed. The thought of torture was too much for her, as for all women. I rose to my feet, this time with none to chide me, and hardly felt the pain, as I put my hand on her head.

"Mercedes! Mercedes!" I don't think I knew I was using her name. She lifted her face in wonder, the tears yet in her eyes.

"You suffered this hell rather than tell?" she whispered.

"I would not tell, if I were in a thousand hells," I said passionately. "You think there is a pain there in these feet. I feel nothing. It is not they that are wounded and suffering. It is my heart, my heart. Fire has not injured them; the fire is in my heart, Mercedes!"

Her hands touched the tips of mine, and hers were cold like ice. I took them in mine and warmed them.

"Do you know what you said just now?" she asked lowly.

"I called on your name," I answered softly.

"No; I mean before that — when you were scarcely conscious."

"I know nothing except that I am here and with you."

"You said what you said once before," she answered gently. "Do you remember when you came into the camp with the fever upon you, and fell at my feet?"

"What did I say?" I asked, drawing her gently to me.

She whispered.

"I am glad. I am glad. I say it again," I whispered back. "From the beginning of the world I was destined to say that to you. Hear it again, and again, now and now."

I whispered the words in her ear, and I held her to me, thrilled to the quick with the exquisite emotion of that moment, and oblivious of all pain and danger and trouble and sorrow.

Presently Mercedes withdrew from my arms. "You must remember you are an invalid," she said, and then irrelevantly: "And to think that I hated you — once!"

"You hated me for what you thought, and perhaps a little for what I was," I answered. "But I am that no longer. What treasure I have is here, and with me. I want no other."

She gazed at me in a little abstraction, standing there with the fine nobility of form which had appealed to me from the first. "I had no right to blame you, or to criticise you," she said sadly, "I, least of all."

"I was an adventurer greedy for gold," I reminded her.

"Greedy for adventure, I think," she amended, smiling. "It is I who have been greedy for gold."

"I don't understand," I said. "What does it all mean? What did your letter mean?"

"Yes, there is my story," she said, after a pause, and speaking slowly. "I know yours. You must have mine. I wrote to you that the treasure had been removed."

"You found it?" I interjected as a question.

"No. I know where it is, but I did not find it. I owe you an explanation. The treasure was removed a year ago by Mr. Raymond. You know me as Mercedes Varley. My name is Mercedes Varley Raymond. Don Ramon was my father."

There was a long silence between us, but I held her hand.

"Will you tell me more?" I asked gently, as soon as the wonder of this announcement had abated.

"My father had an estate in California," said Mercedes, leaving her hand in mine. "He was a dreamer rather than a practical man, and he had studied deeply the history of the American continent. Above all, the Conquest of Mexico and Peru by his ancestors had seized hold of his imagination. He pored over books on this subject, he made collections of antiquities bearing on it, and he had gathered together a lot of strange and new material, as he considered, for a history of the Aztecs and the Incas. It was in that way that he was brought into a study of the treasure which the Incas were known to have had, and to have buried when hard pressed by the Spaniards. My father thought he had determined the place of burial, and he made an expedition to Peru to follow up the clues.

“I believe,” said Mercedes softly, “that he did this, that he was anxious to find this out, more for the sake of the antiquarian interest in it than because of the value of the treasure. He was not a wealthy man, but he had plenty of money for his tastes. We lived very simply in California. My mother died when I was a child. Her name was Varley, which was why I assumed it on this expedition.

“My father and I were much attached to each other. He was generous and kind, but he was necessarily somewhat aloof from practical life, engrossed by his studies. That is what I mean when I say I don’t think he was influenced by the value of the treasure — at least, not at first.

“My father, in his expedition in these Andes, came upon an Indian village in the fastnesses of the mountains, and became friendly with the old chief. He had learned Indian dialects in his enthusiasm for the subject, and was able to talk with the chief. This man, when they had grown friendly, communicated to my father a secret. He was of the old Inca stock, as were the tribes of that district, and he had inherited many traditions. The Indians were sun-worshipers like their more cultivated ancestors. This man, Ingres, my father wrote, was the hereditary keeper and custodian of the ancient temple of Astarnok, and, though it was in ruins, the Indians held it in great reverence and scrupulous respect. Ingres told my father a great deal about the temple, had stories of its foundation, and strange traditions connected with it. There was one thing which he held sacred, and that he showed my father. It was

a metal box which he had unearthed within the precincts of the sanctuary, and which he kept buried there. My father examined this. Ingres declared it to contain sacred scriptures of the Incas; but he could not read. The box contained a scroll, stained yellow with age, but decipherable, and the scroll was filled with writing in ancient Spanish."

"The priest!" I exclaimed, in my eager interest. "That scroll has perished like the unfortunate priest."

Mercedes sighed. "One more death due to this terrible quest," she said, and resumed her story. "My father deciphered the writing, and found, to his amazement and delight, that it had been penned by a dying sailor probably two hundred years before, and purported to give the location of the Big Fish which had been interesting him. My father never discovered, or at least never told me, how the sailor's secret came to be buried in the casket in the ruins of the temple. But Ingres held it sacred, not knowing what it contained, but satisfied that it was connected with the ritual of his religion. Now, I have told you that my father was not so much interested in the question of the treasure as in the Incas antiquities, and this was true. But I think that from that time on, somehow, perhaps naturally, the treasure grew on him. It seized his imagination."

"He was not to blame. It seized on mine," I interrupted. "It would have seized on any one's."

"Yes, that is so," agreed Mercedes, "and yet I think there must be something fatal in the infatu-

ation. My father — ” She sighed again. “ I am near the end now, which, alas, was to mean his end also. Leaving Astarnok and the priest, he made out the bearings of the cache with some difficulty, and after one or two false solutions he at last found the right one. The Big Fish lay at his disposal.

“ I think that by this time the treasure had become an obsession. He started out with a small equipment, and now he dismissed his Indians, and was left alone with a few mules. He did not wish any one to know of his operations. He dug up the treasure, and packed it on his mules, and set out for the coast. It was terrible weather in the mountains. The Sierras were in sandstorms daily. Heat and cold alike were unendurable. His mules began to fail. One died, and the extra burden placed upon the others made them flag. Soon he perceived that it would be impossible for him to make the coast in these conditions, and so he hit upon the plan of rehiding the treasure. The death of a second mule hastened his decision, and he deposited the treasure in a safe place of concealment, and went on.

“ The bad weather continued. He lost all his mules, and, some days later, staggered half dead into the camp of some prospectors.”

“ Yes,” said I, “ and that ’s really where the story begins.”

“ That is where the tragic part of it begins,” said Mercedes. “ My father’s inadvertence let out to these scoundrels, whom you know as Houston and Werner’s gang, the secret he had wished to guard. The result was that he was a persecuted man. He

was shadowed wherever he went, and the pursuit followed him even to England, where he went in an effort to shake it off. It got on his nerves, and affected his health. He suspected every one. He resorted to various devices to try to throw off his tormentors, and at last, finding even his landlord in the pay of the gang, he hit upon a notion to deceive them."

Mercedes paused. The day was growing over the peaks, and the camp was in a bustle, but I had no eye or ears for others than she.

"You know about the lacquered box?" I asked.

"Before he died — it must have been some two days before — my father wrote to me a long letter. It is because of that letter I am here. I had heard from him earlier, from Lima, as to the remarkable discovery he had made, but from London he wrote full particulars and details. He knew he was dying, and he gave me instructions to equip an expedition to recover the Big Fish."

"And you have done so?" I asked.

"No." Mercedes was silent a moment; then she added: "It rests where he left it. I have not touched it. You shall hear presently. But you ask me about the lacquered boxes. They were my father's device to deceive his sworn enemies. I think he must have trusted to his message in the box to lead his foes astray, and exhaust them in a profitless venture. I knew of the lacquered boxes, but I do not know how you came to have knowledge of them."

And at that I told her our story, so far as it had been unknown to her before, of the auction

room and the burglary, and of all that had followed in sequence to the hour of our meeting in the Sierra.

She listened attentively, and when I had finished she said: "This treasure has brought nothing but evil. It should be left where it is."

"Yes," said I. "As the treasure belongs to you, you have the right to dispose of it. Where you say, there it shall lie."

Suddenly she put her hands on my shoulder, and looked at me earnestly.

"I want to get back to Lima; I want to leave this cruel place."

"My dear, my dear!" I cried, stroking her head, "we will go back together now."

There was a certain commotion in the camp which drew my eyes even from Mercedes at this moment.

"Manuel!" she exclaimed, as the Indian came loping through the scrub, and over the fire towards her. "What is it, Manuel?"

The Indian, in whom I recognized the North American type, was breathing heavily, with distended nostrils. He pointed north.

"They are coming," he said simply. "They have got on the trail."

"Oh!" I cried out in dismay and fury. "I have brought ruin on you."

She shook her head, smiling. "It is I who brought it on you — and torture. No; no." She turned to Manuel, and spoke rapidly in Spanish.

"We can be on the way in half an hour," she said to me.

I shook my head. "If they are on the trail, they are bound to overtake us."

"Then what do you advise?" She looked at me anxiously, hanging on my words.

"We must prepare to defend ourselves," I said decisively.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CLEFT IN THE ROCKS

MY words must have been startling, but she did not wince nor protest. Her face was a shade paler; that was all.

"You think they will attack us?" she asked.

"If they find us, and you refuse to give them the information they want, they will not hesitate. They are men utterly without scruple, as their treatment of your father shows. But you can save the situation by telling them where the treasure is. Your letter must have told them that you know where it is."

Here, however, was my surprise, and a return of my marble queen. Mercedes drew herself up. "They shall not learn one word from me about the treasure. It is my father's; let it lie where he laid it."

"Then we will fortify ourselves against attack," I said, smiling.

"But you — your feet —" said Mercedes, protesting.

"There is no time to consider feet," I said. "Besides, my dearest, they are ever so much better for your ministrations. Give me moccasins or something, and a mule for the moment, and I'll not call the king my cousin, certainly not this day, of all days."

"Manuel, Mr. Poindexter says we must prepare for the enemy," said Mercedes to her faithful henchman.

He nodded, and spoke in guttural Spanish which I could not follow. Mercedes turned to me.

"He agrees with you. The trail will be too clear, and they would overtake us."

"How far away are they?" I asked.

Manuel's reply was that we might expect them during the afternoon, unless something threw the hounds off the scent.

"Let me have a mule," I said, and when Manuel had gone, I suddenly remembered Mrs. Chester; and I think this was only because my eyes lighted on her at that moment. She came out of a tent where she had been blessedly hidden, and walked toward us. Her eyes were heavy, and her face worn. She gave me her hand. I knew she had known I was there, and in my heart I thanked her for her tact.

"Is it true that they are coming?" she inquired wearily, I thought.

Mercedes answered her: "It is possible they may find us. We're going to stay here." Suddenly she said impulsively: "Would you tell them where the treasure is if you were in my case, Freda?"

Mrs. Chester I had always looked upon as a gentlewoman of eminently feminine instincts; but she amazed me now with her outburst.

"No, Mercedes," she said fiercely. "Tell them nothing. Let us fight them if they come. Let us destroy these thieves and murderers."

Mercedes passed her arm round her, and gave me

a meaning look; and just then Manuel came up with the mule. I had been tired and exhausted with my experiences of the night, but somehow I had received the breath of new life from Mercedes, and I felt refreshed, and even vigorous. It was the spirit given a new lease and dominating the weary flesh. Manuel and I made an examination of the neighborhood, and in a very short time we had resolved to move the camp as a result of our exploration. The rocky saddle, in the shelter of which the camp had been pitched, terminated abruptly on one side in a huge cliff, which abutted on a narrow gorge in the bed of a wild torrent. Across the stream the peaks rose in a bold succession of bluffs, clad with snow, and reaching in some cases to aspiring heights. The loftiest were even now, as we moved in the early morning, lost in the mists of those lonely altitudes. The torrent, which we crossed after a little trouble, caused at once by the rockiness of the bed and the extreme velocity of the water, was reinforced in the trough of the gorge by a violent little stream from a chasm in the countervailing cliff. Examining this, we found that the cleft in the rocks from which the stream issued penetrated into the cliff one hundred yards or more, and, beginning with a narrow passage like the neck of a bottle, twelve feet wide, expanded into a broader space, in which it would be impossible to hide many more people than constituted our camp. We had in all eight Indians, exclusive of Manuel, and ten mules, and I learned with satisfaction that the mules were still heavily loaded. That meant that we were well provisioned, and could stand a siege, if

it came to the crisis. The cleft in the gorge was almost as if it had been made for us, and we lost no time in transferring the camp across the torrent, and setting it up again in that seclusion.

This we accomplished before midday. Manuel had reckoned that Houston and Werner would complete the trail by the afternoon; so that there was yet a little time to spare. Before the necessity and the practicability of action, my spirits rose. I no longer felt my injuries, though I was obliged to use a mule, and I confess that my new relations with Mercedes had so divinely stimulated me that I was in a riot of delight.

This menace of the enemy I minded no more than if it had been a game on which we were to embark, a trial of strength, say, in a football match.

I was resolved that we should be equal to the foe, and indeed superior, and I was prepared to crack heads with glee. I reckoned up the men in the camps. There were seven Indians and Diego with Houston, and Werner had even a larger following, besides the whites. But I did not pay much heed to the Indians, a mild and reluctant race. The mestizos were different, and could be trusted to fight for their masters. It was obvious that we were greatly outnumbered, even if we could rely upon our Indians. Manuel, a shrewd fellow, had already settled in his own mind upon the pitch to which these could be trusted, and he pointed out two Cholos, who, he declared, would prove their devotion to their mistress. That, you will see, only gave us four fighting men.

We were, however, hoping that there would be no

conflict, and that the gang would drive over the Sierra after an imaginary quarry, while we hugged our close quarters in the gorge. In any case, I never doubted the issues. Nothing on earth could come between me and mine, and the desire of my heart. I moved in an ecstasy, on altitudes of mind and soul from which all else was seen small, petty, insignificant, and negligible.

The Indians sent out to discover the progress of the raiders returned with the information that they were making up a difficult ravine some miles to the northwest, and it was, therefore, not possible for them to reach us until quite late in the afternoon. Our dispositions were made, and all was in readiness.

We were, I found fairly supplied with arms; and I replaced my lost revolver. There was ammunition in plenty, as practically none of the supplies had been drawn upon. Mercedes, with that exquisite surrender she had made, seemed to have entrusted me with all things. She stood aside, and allowed me to take command, and I thanked her for that dear exhibition of her faith.

“Supposing I am incompetent?” I asked.

“But you are not,” she returned.

“What makes you say that?” I questioned her.

She was silent, turned a rose-color, and smiled.

“I don’t know. I feel it.”

“Shall I tell you what it is?” I said. “It is your love. For love spells faith and hope and everything. All other emotions and sentiments have their source in love, and flow from it. That was the one flaw I could detect in the English version of the

Bible. Why Faith, Hope and Charity? It should be, and is now, Love. Charity is cold, as cold as — as charity. But Love is full of warmth and brightness. Well, dearest, your love stimulates your faith. I shall endeavor to be worthy of both.”

“I trust you — I trust you all in all, I, who doubted you once,” she said earnestly, giving me her hands. “Come with me now, and I will show you what none knows but me. But you shall know.”

“I who am one with you,” I murmured gently; and the rose blossomed in her cheeks.

Manuel brought us mules, and we wended our way down the gorge, turned up a tributary cañon, and, mounting gradually, entered a pass between black and gloomy hills. They were bare and stony, and enclosed, as in a ring of black summits, a black and ice-cold lake. Here and there the hills rose sheer from the dark water with jutting crags and abutting precipices, but in other parts the height receded leaving a shore. But, seen on this day as I saw it, the lake, which was no more than a few miles in circumference, was a dead thing. It lay stretched like a stagnant pool in the Inferno, and imagination could conceive the abysmal horrors in its depth. The water held no movement, and filled the basin like ink in a cup without a ripple or stir at the edges. It seemed hardly water, but rather something heavier, some Stygian slime at which to shudder. I think Mercedes did shudder.

“This is where my father hid the treasure,” she said in a low voice.

I gazed. The sky was clear and clean overhead,

but had no reflection in that blackness. I went to the verge of the water, and peered in. The shallows soon merged in the profundity of the lake, and impressed me dismally.

"Was it here?" I asked.

"Yes, the directions were explicit in his letter. He sank them in his flight, and always meant to return. Those men prevented that. Do you not think I should hold them responsible for his death?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad. Now you know why I would cut off my hand rather than give them this secret. Like you, I have something to avenge."

"Dearest, I think I gave that up, and it was your words that persuaded me."

"How strange!" she said. "I remember. I was myself doubting, wondering, at the time. I wavered for ever so long. I wish I knew." She was silent. "But this they shall never know. I will die sooner. To hand to those guilty men the means of wealth, a colossal fortune — no, it is inconceivable!"

"Let it rest, and await the day of Judgment," I said softly, and we turned on an impulse together, and went slowly away.

That was my only exploration. For the rest of the afternoon we remained in concealment, and when the sun had long faded from the walls of our refuge, we were still keeping close, watching and waiting. I flattered myself that the trail could not be traced from the old camp to our present retreat, for we had taken elaborate means to obliterate it, and for that purpose had traveled in the bed of the torrent for

some distance. Even if the trail were picked up as far as the stream, it would cease there. Yet what would happen, if Werner found there was nothing beyond? This was the point of anxiety, for it was possible that this discovery, if he made it, would chain the brigands to the neighborhood, at least until their stores gave out. But I reflected with satisfaction that our better supplies would give us the advantage over them. On the whole, I concluded that there was no ground for discouragement, and I said so. Both Mercedes and Mrs. Chester behaved with admirable pluck, the one because it was her nature, and her blood ran strong and full in cases of emergency; the other, I think, out of a kind of apathy into which she had fallen. So dusk came, and, having set our guards, we settled into sleep.

The night passed quietly enough, without alarms, but as I was anxious to know how we stood, I made investigations at dawn.

To my astonishment, there was no sign of the gang. I passed out of the cleft into the gorge, and examined the surrounding hills with the aid of field glasses; and, finding nothing to disturb me, I crossed the stream and crept up the hill opposite in the direction of the earlier camp. Here nothing was visible, and I came to the conclusion that Werner and Houston had missed the trail, and gone off on a false scent. If so, our situation might be improved, for we had only to pull out and descend the Sierras, with perhaps two days between us and our pursuers.

I returned as carefully as I had come, keeping a wary watch on all aspects of the gorge. It stretched

between majestic heights, and vanished in a bend farther up. It was scattered with boulders, and the torrent ran at this time of year, at any rate, in a central channel. In the time of heavy rains or melting snows, I could conceive that the flood filled the cañon. I was half-way across the bed of the stream when I caught sight of a man's figure moving on the farther side, and even as I caught sight of him he came to an abrupt stop behind a huge boulder. His back was toward me, and I do not suppose I was more than two hundred yards away; but the river was between us. I recognized him at that distance as one of Werner's half-breeds. It was obvious that he did not see me, for he was gazing toward the cleft where our camp lay, and now I made out at the entrance to the passage Manuel's figure, as it were on sentry duty. Clearly the mestizo had caught sight of him, and consequently was in possession of our secret.

I hope I shall never in my life repeat the horrible experience of mental doubt through which I went during the next five minutes. It amounted to an agony. Swiftly the considerations swept into my mind, leaving me chilled with horror. I saw the whole logic of the position. 'This man had stumbled upon our hiding-place. *He must not be allowed to go back with his information.* It was the sequence of that thought, the inevitable sequence which filled me with terror. In my lamed condition, it was not conceivable that I should be able to cross the stream and surprise him, and so take him captive. There was only one alternative. I had a rifle. I threw it forward.

The man was an easy mark, for he never moved; he crouched behind the rock waiting, with his eyes on Manuel. I could have brought him down as easily as a sitting bird, a barn-door fowl. But his back was to me.

I could not, I dared not draw the trigger. Once, twice I aimed, and then dropped the muzzle of the gun; and then the situation solved itself. Whether it was that my movements, which were quite visible to him, stirred the quick senses and wits of Manuel, or whether the mestizo's head betrayed itself in an unwary moment, I do not know. But the next things I was aware of were the report of a gun, smoke ascending from near Manuel, and the figure of the mestizo in flight. He ran among the boulders with incredible speed, dashing up the gorge. My feet disabled me from following, but Manuel plunged after the man, and I saw them disappear round a projecting rock, and vanish from the plane of sight. I went back to the passage in disappointment and alarm. The enemy had not gone, and the chances now were that they would learn where we were concealed. I waited anxiously for the return of Manuel, only to have my fears confirmed. The half-breed had shown a clean pair of heels, and had vanished in the upper reaches of the gorge, where it was broken into a score of narrow channels. And thus we were forced to sit down and wait on fate.

This came within the next two hours, in the form of a visit from Werner and Houston and Jeff. One of the Indians, Pedro, was on guard in the passage entry, and gave warning.

"If you enter, Werner, we fire," I shouted, as soon as I perceived who the visitors were.

"It's all right, Poindexter," said he. "No violence intended. We want a confab. Talk's the word. Bury the hatchet, meanwhile."

I turned this over, and then I said: "I'll let you come in, but not Houston."

Werner waddled forward, though Jeff made an effort to detain him, and spoke in a low tone in his ear. Werner shook him off, and came direct to us, with a grin on his face. Houston sat down leisurely on a rock in full view.

"Think I don't know my Poindexter," said Werner, as he came up. "That's the sort of blind man I've got to work and play with. Now, Houston took it like a lamb. It's a deuce of a pity he's so crooked."

"Do you think he's going straight now?" I asked.

Werner's grin faded, and he looked back, even a little apprehensively. "Damn it, he's got to," he growled. "We're rowing in the same boat."

"You remember the old joke?" I said. "With different skulls? You're clever enough and dogged enough and brutal enough, as I have reason to know. But you're not on Houston's level."

He scowled, for I believe he was jealous of Houston. "Let's get to business," he said.

"Come in, Werner, come in," I said, limping forward. "Excuse me if I go slowly, but my feet are rather painful. You see I was badly mauled yesterday by a bird of prey. You know those creatures — vultures. They abound in the Andes."

His brow constricted. "Look here, Poindexter," he said, "this might be all very well in a club, but we're at serious grips here. You know it was all in the game. I don't know how you managed to escape, but, anyhow, I reckon we're only a day short."

"Your reckonings have been out more than once before, Werner," I reminded him.

"Oh, shut down," he said. "There's no need for all this finessing. You know what we want."

"What you want is the moon," I said. "It's about as likely to be found as the Big Fish."

"Miss Varley knows where it is, and we're bound to know also," said he.

"I want you to understand this clearly," I answered; "Miss Varley knows that the treasure was removed, and that's the end. There's no deal."

"There will be," he said grimly.

"Miss Varley is leaving here to-day, and is going down to the coast," I told him. "I don't think I have anything further to say to you, except that if I find my vulture, I'll have a shot at him."

He made a movement, and I lifted a hand. "Be careful, Werner. You are covered. You have been covered ever since you set foot in this place. I don't want any one else to shoot my vulture."

He drew back. "You're not talking sense," he said. "We hold you in a cleft stick. All we want is the information where the treasure is. I'll even undertake you shall share in it, though we could squeeze you out, anyway."

"The treasure is not yours," I said. "It's no one's. If I knew a thousand times where it was I

would n't tell you. Better give up, Werner. Cut your loss."

"Do you think, man, I'm going to go back on what I've worked for for twelve months?" he asked angrily. "Don't be a fool. You can't move me. Raymond had the chance and failed. I take it up."

"But Raymond's daughter will see that you don't," said a voice behind us, and turning, I saw Mercedes, her eyes flashing, her face under the color of her anger. I made an exclamation, but she was not looking at me. She held Werner under the fury of her gaze.

"Raymond's daughter!" he gasped, and added: "Well, I'm damned!"

"Your negotiations are useless," said Mercedes. "Why waste time with him?" she asked me.

"You have your answer, Werner," I said.

He nodded, not yet recovered from his surprise. "That makes it easier," he said. "Now, we know you know."

Mercedes looked at me for the first time, and I seemed to read a question in her eyes.

"Clear out!" I said promptly. "Miss Raymond is right. We waste time. Any dealings we have with you will be of another color."

"Yes; I believe you're right, Poindexter," he said slowly. "Anyway, I've done my best. My conscience is clear," and he turned and waddled back through the passage, with this amazing bit of irony on his lips.

"Did I do right?" cried Mercedes, when he had gone, and I had not the heart to deny her.

Yet I knew that now for certain these vultures would not leave us. They would hover about and attack us.

The attack, the first attack, came within the next hour. You will have seen that we had the advantage of position, and I do not think they realized the strength of our force. To them we were merely two women, one white man, and the usual mild Indians, who would resign at a blow. They had not reckoned on the tumultuous spirit of Mercedes, nor on Manuel, who was an invaluable ally, Manuel it was who, on watch at the entrance to the passage, espied the enemy creeping along the wall. They had advanced under the shelter of an abutting bluff which shut out the view of the upper gorge on this side of the stream. Manuel perceived them as they turned the corner and emerged into view, and, shouting to me a warning, he discharged his gun. The foremost man fell, but several others crowded over his body and came up with a rush. I had joined Manuel at his call, and was in time to meet this charge. We both fired, and the blast of the weapons at such close quarters stayed the assault. Miguel, who was in the front, spun about, and limped, and a half-breed stumbled forward on his face. Shots from the party went by us harmlessly, cracking on the wall of rock. "It's certain death, Werner," I shouted. "Come on, if you want it."

He growled out an oath, and under the menace of our barrels the marauders turned and fled, the wounded staggering in the rear. The noise of the guns had brought Mercedes from the interior fast-

nesses of the camp, and she hung upon my brief narrative almost breathlessly.

“What will they do next?” she asked. “They won’t give up — those men. What will they do next? Oh, ought I to have told them? You’re not wounded, nor Manuel? I’m glad, I’m glad! But what ought I to do? Was any one killed? It’s their own fault, is n’t it?”

There was this sheerly feminine nature under the marble of my Lady of the Snows. She was brave, but she had the woman’s dread of war and all its horrors. So for the matter of that had I, but a man in the eager exchange of blows and wounds is in another case. Everything these ruffians might suffer was richly deserved. I had no mercy nor compassion for them, particularly as I knew we had not seen the last of them, and I spent the rest of the day in anxious waiting. Nothing happened. We saw no sign of the enemy, and night fell with her “train of stars,” night which was deeper night to us, buried within the channel of those aspiring walls. Guard was kept without ceasing, for it was night that I feared. The second attack was delivered about two in the morning.

It came with a rumble of sound from all sides of the entrance, as if there was a concerted attempt to confuse us. This I believe was exactly what Werner had designed. Voices on one side and another, incoherent shouts drew our attention. We fired at random, as at ghosts, but it was impossible to see a yard in front of one, and no doubt the shots went wide. A light flared forty paces away and went

out, after eliciting Manuel's fire. Laughter mocked us out of the darkness, and we could only wait and wonder, with a growing sense of anxiety because the enemy refused to declare himself.

We had been on this nervous rack for some twenty minutes before the assault came. It was, no doubt, preconcerted, and I traced Houston's hand in it. From several quarters the rush took place, and though Manuel and Pedro and I fired several times, it was impossible to be sure that our volleys were effective. I discharged my revolver in a wide arc, and Manuel's fire seemed to me to be concentrated on one particular spot. The sound of the firing on both sides ricocheted from cliff to cliff, and boomed dully down the gorge, drowning all other sounds. I caught a glimpse of a black figure, as it had been an evil shape flitting through the obscure shades of an Inferno, and then Manuel's rifle barked, and was silent. Silence seemed suddenly to have fallen. There was a groan behind me, and I turned and found Pedro's head against the rocky wall, where he had fallen. "They have gone," said Manuel. "There is one fallen, two fallen, more."

He retreated a pace or two into the passage, and under shelter struck a light. Pedro's face looked deathly, but Manuel surveyed it without emotion. He lit a lantern and walked out of the passage into the open gorge. I could see his light shaking as he walked, making him a conspicuous object for a rifle. But Pedro demanded all my attention, and I called help and succeeded in getting him to the tents. He had a bullet through his body, and I judged that

his case was hopeless. Mercedes, pale but resolute, bathed the wound, and Mrs. Chester assisted her in her kindly ministrations. But Pedro was going. I knew it, and I was sad for the faithful soul, whom white men had thus done to death. Manuel returned, and a new guard was set. He had found two men dead, out among the rocks, and we knew that several others must have received wounds. Our fire had been close and deadly. Manuel seemed to have cat's eyes. There was no fear that the gang should return that night. They had had their dose.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BOMBARDMENT

IT was, nevertheless, an unquiet night that we passed, and I think neither Mercedes nor Mrs. Chester slept at all after the engagement. I walked once to their tent and replenished the fire, and a soft voice called to me. I drew nearer the tent, and a hand was placed in mine.

“Is all well?” she asked, in a whisper.

“I ’m awake,” said Mrs. Chester’s voice from the enclosed darkness; and “Oh!” cried Mercedes.

They came out of the tent, and sat by the fire which burned brightly. Mercedes’ wonderful hair was down about her neck and secured with a ribbon. She looked very girlish, and I marvelled at the tenacity of purpose which had brought her through all these discomforts and perils, and was now exposing her to this new and final danger.

To while away the time I told them some tales of my adventures in the back parts of Europe, and of the treachery and cruelty of those barbarous people there.

“We can’t boast, after all,” said Mercedes, “though we are occident of the occident. Look at

the creatures our civilization has produced — is producing!" she waved her hand toward the cliff.

"Yes, but those are the by-products of civilization," I said. "In those Danubian provinces, what we see is the normal product. It is the average. Thank God, we are ashamed of our ruffians; they are our failures."

Thus unintentionally, you see, our thoughts had worked round to our present condition; and, seeing that they had flowed thither almost against our will, I gave up the attempt to divert our minds, and we spoke freely. I think it was the darkness, the environing night that opened our hearts in that talk. Mercedes spoke of her father, and of her girlhood, of Vassar, and of her friends in New York; and we spoke of Cassilis, too. I summed him up as the finest and truest friend a man might dare to hope for in this world, and Mercedes said: "I liked him from the first; even when I thought you were wicked, I think I liked him and fought against it."

There was a gentle sound of tears in the silence which ensued. Mercedes leaned toward me, and I saw her beautiful eyes wild with the light of the fire. "What if it had been *you!*" she whispered.

Queen of Snows! This living, warm, passionate heart testified in ridicule of my early interpretation of her, and had leapt into flame in response to my kindling — how marvellously!

So passed the night away, not wholly without its solace and its comfort.

The following day we remained eagerly on the watch, but we saw nothing and heard nothing of the

gang. We even ventured forth from the cliff, and gave burial to the two hapless half-breeds who had perished in carrying out the nefarious plans of their white masters; bribed by heavy promises of gold, I did not doubt. Poor Pedro lingered on through the day, and died at sunset, and his departure impressed us with a deeper melancholy. Darkness descended, and found us a gloomy camp. The very silence of the enemy seemed to be in itself somehow a threat, — ominous. I had guards mounted carefully, and, having snatched some sleep in the afternoon myself, resolved to stay awake in anticipation of emergencies.

Overhead was the loom of the wall of rock, which ran upward into an invisible black sky. In effect, we were in the base of a deep pit, bounded by great precipices. From our well, I could just make out a star or two in the void above, which seemed but a patch of extra blackness laid across the top of the pit. I was sleepy, for my rest had only been of short duration, and I lay back with my face to the roof of sky. There was a large star of the first magnitude on the very margin of the pit's mouth, or it may even have been a planet. I watched it for a few moments, and then my eyes closed, and I must have slept. It was owing to a sub-conscious feeling of responsibility that I awoke — I daresay only a few minutes later. My weary body struggled with the sense of duty, and at last surrendered. I stared up, eyes wide-open directed upward. Something puzzled me — a memory. Then I knew. It was the star. Where was the star? I could not have slept so long that it had crossed the ceiling and disappeared upon the

other side. I sat up in distress at this thought. It could not have vanished in cloud, for its neighbors were shining still. I stared; and as I stared, suddenly it shone out once more, almost in the identical place in which it had hung when I nodded. I rose, my thoughts alert. Something had obscured the star for a time. What could it be? I got my field glasses and concentrated them on the top of the pit. Something was moving there. I could not make out what it was, but the light from the stars was sufficient to show me a black shadow against the blacker walls of the mountain. I woke Manuel, who was snatching his rest, and together we studied the object. For a long time it was impossible to come to any determination about it. I conjectured it to be a condor, but a moment's consideration put that idea out of court. No condor would bulk so large at that height, and, moreover, no condor would be astir in the dead of the night. Sometimes the object faded from view, gathered, I judged, into the profound darkness of the cliff; but at other times it was visible, a lighter shadow, still moving downward. It was depending from the inmost wall of the cliff, and to the base of that Manuel and I went to keep watch on it. The darkness below, however, in the shadow of the wall, was greater than that above, and soon we lost the thing; it dropped into depths of space, in which nothing was to be disentangled from the general obscurity. Still we kept our posts, waiting, expectant.

And now at last there was a noise audible in the stillness, not a loud noise, but a thin creaking, as of

strained cordage, accompanied by an occasional rasping and dull bumping. Then there was a heavier bump, as of the fall of a body, and after that silence. I signed mutely to Manuel, and we moved outward from the cliff base at a little distance from one another. Was it a figure I saw, or was it merely a trick of one's eyes? I darted forward, and grasped — a human arm. The next second I had the man pinned, so that he could not move.

"Strike a light," I called to Manuel, and after a momentary pause the match flared.

I was staring into the face of Coop! The match went out, and I bade Manuel bring the lantern.

"Yes, it's me right enough," said Coop easily. "By gum, your hand's like a vice. Cheese it, Poin-dexter; that's where I got my gunshot."

That seemed to remind me of events a whole generation away.

"And so you're servant of the man who shot you?" I said sneeringly.

"All in the whirligig of time, you know," said he lightly, as Manuel arrived with the lantern.

I examined this strange specimen. His face was thin; and he was evidently by no means restored to health, but he grinned in my face and his eyes were as bright and impudent as ever.

"What's brought you back, man?" I asked. "You're a fool for your pains all the way round."

"Well, I had to look after my interests, I guess," he answered jauntily. "I did n't quite like trusting it all to chance, you may say."

"Were n't sure of Werner, eh?" I asked.

"Poindexter, you can put it how you like."

"You're a fool," said I, speaking sadly, "for you're a dead man now."

"I shaved it once. Maybe I'll do it again," he replied imperturbably.

Meanwhile Manuel had been making an examination, and now reported that Coop had descended in a sort of cradle, roughly put together, in which he had either lowered himself or been lowered by others. I had no doubt that it was a concerted design, and I assumed it.

"Well, anyway, we'll begin by preventing your friends from joining us," I said, and instructed Manuel to cut loose the cradle. "I fancy we'll be able to give them a welcome if they try again."

Coop said nothing, but watched Manuel philosophically. I had relieved him of his pistol, and I held him covered with mine. "It was n't a bad notion," he remarked presently, with dispassionate regret. "How did you spot me?"

"You had the misfortune to blot out a star," I said.

He laughed. "Rough luck! He died from blotting out a star. It would make a touchin' epitaph. Look here, Poindexter, be a sport over this. I'll toss you double or quits."

"I don't understand," I said.

"I'll pass my word to clear out, if I win. If I lose, you can shoot me and plant me."

"I don't think you understand, Coop," I explained, "but you have lost already. You're a doomed man. We can't afford to have scruples."

"No; I don't think many of them have been knocking about this trip," he said cheerfully. "Well, lead on. I'm mighty cold. Have you got a nip about you?"

Manuel had completed his work, and we turned back to the camp, a hundred yards away. I was sorely perplexed by Coop's presence, and I had a resurgence of the awkwardness which the sight of the half-breed had caused me. What was to be done with this man who so persistently refused to take things seriously? When I reached my tent, having taken precautions against another surprise from the skies, I was weak enough to fetch out a whisky bottle. Mercedes had included a supply against emergencies, and this was the second occasion on which it had been drawn upon. The thought had its ironical side. Coop sipped his drink with zest, and, having filled a pipe, smoke and talked.

"It turned me up a bit when I found Houston hobnobbing with Werner, I'll admit," he said affably. "I've got a grudge against him, and I'll pay it some day. He don't play fair. But Werner's a gentleman, though a bit rough. I don't know that I'd pin my faith on any one of 'em exactly. Anyhow, I had to come up as soon as I could move, and see what was what. I could n't abide laying in bed doing nothing. And then to think of Miss Varley! Lord, it's a caution!"

"Miss Varley befriended you when you would have surely died," I reminded him. "Miss Varley is now being attacked murderously by your friends."

"Oh, as for murderously," said Coop, "it seems

to me you can't complain. You have three scored up to your account. Werner was pretty mad."

"If footpads attack me, I can't be responsible," I said.

"Well, anyway, what's to be done. Are you game to toss?" he inquired.

"I have no room or time to waste on you," I said. "So far as I can see, you ought to be under the turf — well, rocks — by dawn."

"Lord love me, and you a quiet English gentleman!" said Coop, and so incongruous did the statement sound that I could have laughed aloud. But my eyes were arrested. Mercedes had come out of her tent, and was moving towards us.

"Is all well?" she asked, and suddenly, as Coop straightened himself in the presence of a lady, she stopped. "You?" she asked wondering.

"Mr. Coop has joined his friends," I said, "and he is now a prisoner of war."

Mercedes went towards him, until her eyes looked into his, for he had risen shamefacedly.

"I found you ill and dying, Mr. Coop," she said. "I tended you with my own hands, binding up your wounds; and I sent some of my servants to carry you on a litter down to the coast that you might receive treatment and save your life. You lied to me. You made it so that I was instrumental in setting a desperate party of scoundrels on an innocent man's trail. What have you to say to that? No, wait!" she said, holding up a hand as he would have spoken. "And now you have come back to take up arms against me, me, who have only done what I could

to be kind to you. What have you to say to that, also? ”

I think that last indictment furnished him with the chance to slide off on a quibble.

“ I never knew you were in this, when I started up,” he said in an uneasy voice. “ I never knew it until afterward, or I would n’t have told.”

“ Told? ” asked Mercedes haughtily. “ What do you mean? ”

“ About this place,” said Coop. “ You see I spotted people up this gorge as I came along looking for Werner, and though I did n’t know where you were hanging out, I guessed there was an outfit hereabouts. So Werner lay low, sent out spies, and waited, and waiting cotched you.”

“ So it was you,” said I. “ This looks more than ever like the signature of the death-warrant.”

But suddenly Mercedes took action with the characteristic decision of her sex. She stretched out her hands to him in a gesture which I found beautiful.

“ Mr. Coop,” she said, “ I rescued you once, and gave you a chance for life. I give it you again. Go! You are free. I ask nothing of you except what your own conscience may demand. You have come back to me in war, and I give you back your life, which was forfeit. God knows what is in your mind to do, but I pray that He will influence it. You who come in war may go in peace.”

The man stood for a few moments unable to speak. In the light of the fire I could see his face, and it was working curiously. At last he turned in an awkward way, and touched his cap.

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to you," he said sheepishly. "I don't think — well, so long!" And he shambled off toward the entrance.

Taken by surprise as I was by what Mercedes had done, I saw the necessity of carrying the affair to a conclusion, and, knowing that our prisoner would never pass the guard, I followed him, and escorted him through the passage. He did not speak until we were in the gorge, and then he asked abruptly: "Are you linked up there?"

I understood him. "It is my great privilege," I replied.

He whistled softly, meditatively. "You ain't a bad sort on the whole," he said. "But you're not worth that, not by a barrow-load."

"I agree," I said. "But it is only by the condescension of woman that man receives anything." It was odd, but it did n't seem odd, for us to be discussing my relations with Mercedes.

"Oh, well, so long!" said Coop after a pause, suddenly disappearing into the night.

I went back, and Mercedes came to me penitently.

"I did wrong. I ought not to have taken the authority out of your hands," she cried, "but it came over me, somehow. I did just what something told me to do."

"My dearest," said I slowly, "I should n't wonder if you did just what was right and suitable."

I had been turning over in my mind the possibilities of the situation, and somehow this incident of Coop had seemed to have in it something more human than most of the things that had happened. Coop, with

his very vulgar human qualities, seemed to help us to keep in touch with ordinary life. I did not regret Coop's release. As I looked on it now, it appeared to be the only solution possible.

With double guards and sentinels to watch the ramparts, we passed through the rest of the night, and at dawn I took a little rest. I was awakened from this by a terrible clamor in my ears, and, sitting up, I thought the whole ravine was full of thunder. No sooner was I on my feet than Manuel rushed up and began to speak rapidly and with unusual excitement. A rock had fallen into the edge of the camp from the heights above. Even as he spoke, I looked up and saw a huge stone in mid-air. It struck a projection of the wall and rebounded, struck again, and crashed down upon the rocky base of our retreat, breaking into a thousand scattering flinders. Reverberations filled the narrow chasm, and set the drums of the ears in a roar.

This was no accident of nature. It was the latest stratagem of our determined enemy. As we stood helpless, watching, a third rock was rolled over, but from another point in the rampart, and, speeding on its terrible flight, fell upon one of the tents, destroying everything that was in it. Another and another followed in quick succession, until the tents of the Indians which had been set up in that part were a mass of débris. In one of them a hapless man had been crushed to death. It was impossible that this should go on.

I took Mercedes and Mrs. Chester out of the zone of danger and established them under a ledge in the

cliff, where they huddled together in distress, and listened to the cruel bombardment.

The chasm, as I have stated, was narrow throughout, being at no place more than forty or fifty yards across; and it was obvious that no part of it could be perfectly protected from the danger of flying splinters of rock. The scene, indeed, approached in its hazards to the bursting of shells on a battlefield within a confined space. My anxiety for the safety of the ladies can be well imagined. At each fall I looked into the corner where I had placed them, with eyes fearful for what might have happened. And indeed I had cause enough. As I afterwards found, Werner and Houston had spent the bulk of the night in rolling huge rocks up to the mouth of the cavity, and one by one they tumbled these over, leaving the wretched victims below no breathing space. Some missiles went wide, falling into the stream, where they split harmlessly; others, dashed into fragments by collision with the cliff, descended in a shower of hailstones; but the more deadly fusillade consisted in those which dropped into the camp, and scattered destruction and injury among the human creatures collected.

This lasted half an hour, and long before that I had seen to what I was being driven. That was the ugly thing — surrender. I think what finally decided me was not the death of one of the Indians, who was all but cut in two by a slice of flying stone, but the narrow escape Mercedes had. Had she not at the moment been leaning back against the ledge, the fragment of granite, driving with the force of a bullet

from a gun, would have killed her instantly. Then it was that I gave in. I went through the passageway, and out on the gorge, with the standing rocks as their cover, were Werner and Houston, and others of their party.

"I hoist the white flag," I called. "I submit. Call off your men at once."

Houston put his hand to his mouth and emitted a shrill whistle, like the blast from a miniature siren. I think he had been expecting this denouement, and was prepared. The arch-roguers walked toward me together, an ill-fitting pair, and I awaited them.

"You understand. I give in if you call off your men," I said.

Werner nodded. "My dear man, we don't want to kill you all. That would n't suit our book at all."

Houston was scrutinizing me curiously, I did n't know why.

"We must insist on the usual formalities, Poin-dexter," he said; but it was to Werner and not to him that I handed my pistol. They entered the cleft after me, and at my word the Indians laid down their arms. They looked frightened and uneasy, and I daresay they were glad to be relieved of an unwelcome duty. Everything was quiet overhead. Houston took off his hat to the ladies.

"I'm sorry we have put you to inconvenience," he said.

Werner paid no heed to them. He was keeping an eye on the disarmament.

"You'll pay for this some day," I said savagely and bitterly.

"It's not over yet," he returned curtly. "We'll pay what price is necessary."

I could not see any sign of Manuel, and I feared that he had been one of the victims of the bombardment.

Mercedes looked at me pitifully. "Is it all over?" she seemed to say. But, as Werner said, it was n't. We were captives, but it was as yet uncertain what was to come next.

"I suggest an adjournment," said Houston pleasantly. "This is not a nice scene for ladies."

In silence we made our preparations for departure, taking such of the mules as had escaped, and in silence we wended our way out of the chasm, and up the gorge to the camp of our captors. With what embittered feelings I went under the yoke you may conjecture. We were prisoners of war, but how would we be treated?

I wondered — and I feared.

CHAPTER XIX

PRISONERS AND CAPTIVES

THERE was no sign of Manuel. That was the strange thing. He had not been struck by the stones, as I found from inquiries I made, but he had vanished completely. I had, however, no time to consider his fate, for it was evident that the gang designed to act forthwith. Indeed, we were no sooner in the camp than Werner opened on us. Of course I had anticipated what would be their demand. They wanted the secret of the Big Fish. As it was known to them that Mercedes was Raymond's daughter, they had no doubt that she was in his confidence. They supposed, I found, that it was she who had removed the cache, and I think this supposition increased their respect for her. They began mildly.

"It's time we came to business, Miss Raymond," was how Werner put it, bluntly but inoffensively.

Houston twirled a cigarette in his fingers, and listened. He was a subordinate for the moment, and gave way to brute strength.

"I think I can speak for my associates," continued Werner, "when I make you an offer, — an offer I made once to Poindexter. Give us your in-

formation, and you shall take a toll of the treasure, and call all things square."

Mercedes had recovered from the nervous shock of the bombardment, and was in possession of her old spirit. Her eyes flashed.

"You think I am going to put it in your power to get the treasure after the wicked and abominable deeds you have done?" she asked indignantly.

Houston looked at his nails critically.

"I do," said Werner grimly.

"Let us begin in proper form," suggested Houston suavely. "Miss Raymond, I'm sure, would prefer that. In the first place, you will please understand, Miss Raymond, that we are quite determined to lay our hands on the Fish. You may make that so to speak, your major premise, as logicians say. Take it as absolute. It's a mere question of time and method. Of course we should greatly prefer that the method should be of our mutual choosing, one of common consent, if you follow me." He paused. "But we are quite prepared for other eventualities, as" — his eyes moved to me — "as Mr. Poindexter knows."

I started up in a fury of passion, but realized my helplessness. Both these men were armed, and they were indifferent to me.

"Accept, then, Miss Raymond, our assurance," proceeded Houston, in his leisurely way, "that we would much rather settle the affair in a friendly fashion. I want you to think it over. There's no immediate hurry. Look round the edges of the posi-

tion. Consider how you stand, and the profit and loss of it all. Strike, if I may advise you, a balance-sheet, and then answer. I think I can promise that consideration will repay you. You know the situation. What do you advise Miss Raymond, Poin-dexter?" he ended, with cool assurance, turning to me.

I was staggered. His cunning question put at that moment bewildered me. I knew not how to answer, for God knows what terrible imaginings were in my head. I realized the savage and unscrupulous nature of these men who, in their lust for gold, had become as callous as fiends of the Inferno. What would they not dare? What would they not do? I shuddered as I looked at Mercedes in all her proud beauty. Scorn was swelling her delicate nostrils as she met my gaze, scorn of that question, of that appeal, of these vultures who were gathered about their helpless prey.

"Miss Raymond," I managed to say, and I was conscious of stammering, "requires no advice from me. When she asks it, I will give it."

I knew she would ask nothing then; her passion was moving her deeply.

"It is I who have to decide," she said, "and I have decided. I will never consent. You are the men who drove my father to death; and you have been the cause of the deaths of many others by horrible treachery and violence. I would think shame of myself if I dared to bargain with you. You have my answer."

Houston was listening without a trace of expres-

sion on his face, but Werner's features settled into a morose scowl.

"Very well," he said menacingly. "Very well. It's up to us now," and, raising his voice, he called to Jeff, who conducted Mercedes away. I would have followed, but was stopped.

"No, I guess not, Poindexter," said Werner, "not just yet. I want a chat first. The lady's all right at present. I know you're a sensible fellow. Sit down and talk."

I waited expectant, fearful, and Houston regarded me quizzically, as he smoked.

"You'll see, of course, the impossibility of the situation, Poindexter," he said in his friendliest manner. "Here is primitive man on one side, meaning Werner, without offence, and on the other, delicate woman, far from primitive. The two don't go together, somehow. It's only a question of time. It's obvious to you, I suppose, that it must end in the one solution. You have already some notion of our friend's ways."

I was in a cleft stick. What was I to say? I was afraid for Mercedes. What was any treasure worth beside her safety and her immunity? I knew not what steps they proposed to take in the event of her continued refusal, but I was sure they had their plans, and were certain of their success. If I could have slain the ruffians at that moment by a movement I would have made it, and seen them gladly dead at my feet. But all I did was to steady my voice, and contain my passion as I replied.

"You must give me time to think — you must give me time."

"Oh, I think we'll begin at once," said Houston easily. "It will save time. You can go on thinking all the same."

"Begin at once!" I echoed.

"Why, yes; we can't afford to stay here indefinitely," said he. "There's the question of supplies, also. Werner, you'd better put in operation what you've settled."

He rose. "I'll give her one more chance, here and now," said Werner, and made off in the direction of the tents. I was left solitary, and it seemed for the moment that these people were so contemptuous of any potentiality for harm on my part as to leave me free. I found, however, so soon as I began to move that I was watched. One of the mestizos was within a dozen yards, and was armed. He followed me when I walked on. I paced the length of the camp distraught with uneasy fears, praying for some guidance in this very terrible situation. Should I see Mercedes, and persuade her to yield? Would she be persuaded in her indignant fury? As I went, I descried Coop at some distance, and I made toward him.

"Hulloa!" he greeted me, and stuck his hands in his pockets. "So you got it in the neck?"

"Was that your idea, — the rocks?" I asked sternly.

He shook his head. "Houston's. No, I'm tired. I started out too soon. I should be in hospital now." He yawned.

"Werner got the key?" he asked.

"No; Miss Raymond will not deal with murderers," I said.

There was a pause. "But I reckon you're in the know," he said. "You'll have to cave in. They mean business. I should n't wonder —"

"What?" I asked sharply, as he stopped, but he turned his head.

"Oh, I don't know — nothing in particular. But if I was you, Poindexter, I'd own up. It is n't possible not to. You can't keep silence. Good Lord, Werner! And Houston's worse."

"Miss Raymond refuses," I said hoarsely.

I walked from him, and I saw him looking after me with an odd expression. I went to the tents, and was endeavoring to discover where Mercedes and Mrs. Chester were, when Werner emerged from one of the canvases.

"Well," he said, addressing Houston, who was with him, "that settles it."

"Yes, you can go ahead," said Houston softly, and looked at me.

I don't know quite to this day what part they meant me to take in this crisis, though I think I have made a near guess at it. I am sure, however, of one thing, and that is that one or other or both were anxious to put immediate pressure on us, and that I was tortured spiritually now, as I had been tortured physically before, to that end. I was to be worked upon so greatly that I should surrender, or persuade Miss Raymond to surrender.

"Get back!" said Werner to me, and, raising his voice: "Coop, take this man away, you fool!"

Coop had come up behind me, and he put a hand on my arm. There was a queer expression on his face, and I did not know how to read it.

"Better come quietly," he said harshly, and beckoned the mestizo over.

I allowed him to lead me away. God knows I was playing an inglorious part, was cutting an ignominious figure, but I was desperately helpless, destitute even of a shadow of a plan.

I sat with my face in my hands, thinking for hours, wondering if it were possible to strike terror into this hideous camp of lawless men by one singular act of violence that should overawe them. But I was alone, and I was unarmed. Our Indians were under guard, and even if they had not been, they would have been useless at this juncture. I sat in my allotted place with the watchful guard, and the sun passed across the meridian, and the time went by, and the shadows fell, and I was not aware of it. What was happening?

When I looked up once or twice I saw Jeff eyeing me curiously. Did they realize how I suffered, and what I was going through? What did Werner's words portend? I had made up my mind at last. Whatever was happening, even if nothing had happened, I must act, I must speak. Though I should go counter to all the purposes of Mercedes, and violate her wishes, I must speak. I could endure the suspense no longer. I demanded to see Werner, and, faced by him, noted his cruel jaw.

"What have you done with Miss Raymond?" I asked him hoarsely. "Where is she?"

"What affair is it of yours?" he asked gruffly. "Go back to your dreams, man. I've no concern with you."

"But — but — by God, Werner, you must tell me," I shouted.

He turned away. "I'll see about it later. You'll be receptive enough then — and Miss Raymond also. I reckon we shall come to some terms in an hour or two."

He was resolved to break me, to break us both. I saw it now, and I understood the diabolical cunning which was Houston's rather than his. I had nothing before me now but hours of torment. I went back to the rack, and suffered.

Night descended in a swoop like a vulture, black, ravening night to hide these evil deeds. That was the mood in which I looked at it, I, who saw all things in a horror. I know better now. I know how deeply I have reason to bless that kindly night. I was in the folds of its darkness, with gloomy thoughts, waiting the arrival of Werner. I felt he would come, when my spirit had been broken. Well, it was broken now. He would come and take my surrender. I was resolved on that, whatever Mercedes might think or wish. I could endure the strain no longer.

He came, but it was not as I had expected him to come, not in that conquering mood which I had anticipated. He came to the accompaniment of shouts and noises, of wild cries and exclamations, of sounds of a camp in disorder.

He threw open the flap of the tent in which they

had placed me, and the light of a lantern was flashed on me.

"It was n't you, then! I thought it could n't have been. By —"

His face, showing in the red light, was a working horror, possessed by all the deadly passions.

"What is it?" I demanded, for I was not afraid of him, and I took him by the throat. Something had happened to Mercedes. "Where is Miss Raymond?"

He flung away from me.

"Escaped, damn her!" he said, and broke into savage oaths.

My heart leaped lightly from its pit of bitterness, and I smiled in his face. Mercedes gone! That was the hugest satisfaction I could receive. All my anxiety and all my suffering were of no account now, had been worth the purchase of this news.

I wanted to know more, but for the moment I rested content in the general thought, exulting on that captive breaking from her prison.

"There's some treachery at work, or she has the craft of the devil. She escaped before —" Werner's bull voice was rolling on almost unheeded. But memory brought me up. Was it Manuel? Had Manuel escaped from the net which had been cast for us, and was he repeating his earlier feat when he rescued his mistress from Werner's clutches?

As these thoughts were passing in my mind, some one came out of the darkness. It was Houston. Werner flung the lantern forward to see who the newcomer was, and it revealed to me a transfigured

face which I should hardly have known for the man's. It was yellow in the light, his nostrils were puffed out, and his eyes aflame. His face was like that of an enraged wild beast.

"You've let her go? She's escaped?" he snapped.

"H— take you! It was n't me," said Werner, biting back savagely, and the two faced each other like snarling dogs ready to spring.

"How was it?" asked Houston, controlling himself with an effort.

"No one knows. She was in the tent with the other, and Miguel was on guard. He saw nothing. It was pitch-black, of course; but how could a couple of women make off by themselves? Some one gave them assistance, some one who knows the camp. Two mules have gone also. By thunder, if I find the man —"

"Miguel knows nothing — saw nothing! It's incredible!" said Houston.

"He swears there was no sound. He sat by the fire all the time."

"Bah! the man's a fool. He was drunk or something. If it had not been Miguel I might have suspected him, but he'd never throw his chances away for a woman."

"Oh, it was n't he," said Werner impatiently.

Houston was silent. "We must hunt all night. She can't have gone far," he said. "Anyway, we've got a hostage."

He looked at me, and so did Werner. Their insensate fury had abated, and now when they looked

at me it was as with cold consideration of butchers at a victim who is to be slaughtered. But my heart exulted. I did not care. Mercedes was free of their infamous hands.

They left me in rigid custody, and the whole camp was awake and in a hullabaloo all night. I, on my part, slept for the first time for more than twenty-four hours; and I think I passed a more restful night than I had done for many days. I awoke to a sense of the sun, and a brisk wind which plied upon the mountains. The camp had settled down again; guards were stationed, fires were alight, and the business of the morning meal was in progress. I caught sight of Werner in the distance, but he did not come near me, nor was I visited by any one save my guard, who was now one of the half-breeds. I breakfasted with quite an appetite, when I received my allowance at the hands of an Indian, and I sat down comfortably, waiting on fate. No one came near me for hours. I saw Werner go off with some of his men, and by that I knew the hunt for Mercedes was still going on. Somehow, I knew she would not be found. I had regained faith. The sun grew in power, and was shining very hotly by mid-day, when Coop came, bringing me food and water. He sat down and watched me eat. An Indian stood on guard a dozen yards away.

"Peckish?" Coop inquired, and I grinned at him.

"Easy conscience, eh?" he went on. "For my part, I'd like a glass of bitter with my meals. Lord, I have n't touched a bottle of Bass since I was aboard the ship. I pine for it."

He regarded me curiously. "Ain't you satisfied now?" he asked.

I nodded. "I am content. I don't mind Houston or Werner, or even Coop."

He gave a grin. "We did have a pretty rough time," he said appreciatively, "and I should n't have got much change out of you, Poindexter."

I reflected. "No; I don't think you would; but, on the other hand, if I had known what I know now, I fancy you might."

He chuckled his thumb toward his shoulder. "Meaning Houston? That's so. Well, I've squared up a bit with Miss Raymond, anyway."

"What do you mean?" I asked, staring.

He chuckled, glanced at the Indian, and winked. "Nice little game last night! Nutty, eh?"

"What?" I stared still, comprehension dawning slowly on my brain. "You! You mean it was you?"

"*Rather!*" said Coop. "What do *you* think? You see I'm a trusted party in this biz. I've proved myself, suffered in the cause, don't you know. I can take liberties, even with almighty Werner, and I don't care two cheeses for Houston. I owe him one. He's a snake. He fights with poisoned tips. Anyway, no one would think of suspecting Coop, so Coop does the trick, and appropriates the gingerbread, old man, what?"

"I am deeply indebted for this, Coop," I said earnestly. "It wipes out all scores between us. Tell me how you managed it."

He evidently looked back upon his performance

with relish. He had always relished our encounters on the trail up, I believe.

"Oh, it was n't mighty easy," he said. "Miguel has a chump of a head, but he's a nasty Spanish temper. I played some silly carmine game with him, and we had a drink. It was n't quite a square drink, for there was something in it, a drop of stuff I had from the doctor away down there. He don't know a red cent what happened to him, or anything about it at all. I'd got the mules ready in the dark, and one of your Indians. It was a sporting chance, anyway, and it came off, by the Lord."

"Yes, they're not caught yet," I said, but I marvelled that they had succeeded in eluding capture, these two women and one attendant. Then I reflected on the cleverness of the Indians in the topography of the country. Perhaps that accounted for their security.

"No, they're not caught yet, but you are," said Coop, looking at me with interest. "There's one thing I had to do, Poindexter. I had to tell 'em you were free, and would meet them."

"You are right," I said, and added: "They're welcome to me."

"I say, don't you know? Ain't you in the secret?" inquired Coop in dismay.

In that cry I saw the limitations of his generosity and of his sacrifice, and I smiled.

"If I knew anything," I said evasively, "the secret would not be mine to give away."

He pondered. "I reckon you've worked for it as much as any one," he said sagaciously. "But

if you know it, it's bound to come out. I know Werner."

That took my thoughts back. "What happened to Miss Raymond?" I asked. "What did they do?"

He shuffled his feet. "Oh, I don't know," he replied impatiently. "It's yourself you've got to think of now. I say ware wire. *Verb sap!* as they say in Latin."

When he left me, I fell back upon my reflections, which were not wholly disagreeable, and between those and dozing in the heat of the day, I got through the afternoon.

It must have been an hour before sunset that the messenger came from Mercedes, though of course I did not know he came from her till later. I did not recognize him. He was not one of the Indians, and his appearance was strange, his dress differing from the Indians of the lower valleys and punas who had constituted our several parties. He was fully visible to me, as was everything that went on, for he emerged from the wilderness beyond in the charge of Diego, my old enemy. I learned afterward that Werner and his two lieutenants were all engaged in the search for the ladies.

At any rate, Houston held the camp in the hollow of his hand, and Diego brought him this Indian. The interview took place within earshot of my tent. Houston spoke in Spanish, but the Indian shook his head; he tried the Cholo dialect, of which he knew a little, but the man did not understand. He made a gesture of his hand, and held out a piece of paper

to Houston, who took it, wondering. He turned it over, and then exclaimed. Then he read it, and I saw his face lighten, and set slowly into a cast of resolution.

He put the paper in his pocket, and said something in a sharp tone to Diego. Both disappeared, and I saw no more of them. I saw no more of them nor any one save the silent guard, for the next two hours, by which time twilight was fast falling. Then Werner returned, and Jeff and Miguel straggled in after him, from other points of the compass. Coop, too, had been absent, but not on the same errand. He was regarded as being on the sick list. I gathered from their attitude and disposition that they had had no luck.

When he had refreshed himself, Werner came over to me, and gloated over his secured prisoner.

"Well, we start business with you to-night," he said. "There'll be no further escapes. We'll take you later."

I yawned. It was the best I could do to show this man my contempt for him. Jeff came up at that moment, and Werner turned. "Not found him?" he asked, and cursed. "What the mischief does he want going off like this? There might have been an accident, with only the half-breeds here."

"Diego's gone, too," said Jeff, "and two of his Indians. Jago says they took mules."

Werner went off in an explosion. "What fool business is this?" he cried, and seemed to turn over things. "I guess he'll be back presently," he said.

"I suppose he thought he'd got a clue. We'd better wait for him."

He stumped away toward the tent in which I understood Maddock lay recovering from his wound. He entered the tent, and some time later I saw him disappear into the darkness which was settling down. I retired to my tent, and tried to sleep. They were waiting for Houston before beginning upon me. I listened for sounds which would indicate his return, but I heard none. The camp remained in stillness; and so I sank peacefully to sleep.

CHAPTER XX

THE SURPRISE

I WAS awakened by a great commotion, and I got upon my feet. The camp was in an uproar; guns were going off, and men were shouting and running to and fro. The whole place was a scene of gross disorder under the faint starlight. I ran forward, and found no guard to stay me. Figures, visible in the firelight, were moving about, apparently in confusion. It was a little time before I arrived at a comprehension of the situation, and then it was by an accident. What I understood at once was that the camp had been attacked, for the report of guns was sufficient to make this clear.

But what I did not at first realize was the nature of the enemy, against whom Werner's gang was making so deplorable a stand. It was the whistling of an arrow past my face that opened my eyes to the truth. The assault was being delivered by a foe armed with primitive weapons, which, screaming out of the darkness upon the unprepared camp, had spread wide consternation. I heard shouting amid the gunshots, and I guessed that Werner and his associates were endeavoring to rally the terrified Indians, but in these there was no heart. It was no

business of theirs, this sanguinary conflict in which the brutal and mysterious white men were involved, and they refused, scattering before the flight of arrows, and seeking refuge among the boulders.

So far, I had seen nothing of the assailants except their missiles, but that was to be altered presently, and in an amazing way. Werner and his men had given up the attempt to put heart into the Indians, and had established themselves behind a rampart of rocks, from which they maintained a steady fire at the invisible foe. Cries reached me in the intervals of silence from the tent in which Maddock lay, and though I had no reason to feel for the man anything but hatred, I was drawn by the elementary feelings of compassion to go forward in response to his unhuman wailing.

I crossed the open ground, necessarily exposing myself to the arrows, and had all but reached the tent when the unexpected happened. It had been my intention to reassure him, to advise him that his safety lay in silence, and in remaining where he was, that his companions risked more by their situation in the fighting line. But sheer terror must have dragged the hapless wretch from his bed. He emerged from the tent, staggering, giddy, wasted and gaunt, and ere he had taken two steps, and while I was yet a dozen paces away, he went forward on his face, with a shaft through his heart.

I ran toward him instinctively, passing one of the blazing camp-fires. Away to the right, and out of the darkness, I heard a voice crying aloud, and I stopped, bewildered by a memory — a recognition.

But before my thoughts could settle and concentrate on an identification, a tall figure sprang towards me out of shifting and indeterminate shadows. Was it possible? Was it conceivable? Was I moving in a dream?

No, there was the voice and the figure, too.

"Jack! You're safe then," was what came to me.

"Dick! Dick!" I cried. "My God! Is it you? Back from the dead?"

"Jack, it was a miracle, a miracle! I've no time now. Come; you're in the danger zone here, open to two fires. Who's that?" He indicated Maddock's body. "One of the gang. We'll wipe them all out like that. But come away. Who's that? Werner? Where's Houston? Tell me where Houston is."

At this moment I caught sight of figures advancing out of the darkness, and a flight of arrows screamed in the air towards Werner's barricade. Cassilis called out an order, and a dark form sprang towards us, lean, fine, his face alive with the passion of battle. It was Manuel.

"Take them, dead or alive," said Cassilis, pointing to the white men. "Let the other poor devils go. Keep the attack off them."

He advanced as he spoke towards the boulders behind which Werner and his companions had taken refuge, and I followed, reckless of risk. Silence had now fallen, and the effect was strange. When we reached the barricade we saw what had happened. The body of Miguel, pierced by an arrow, lay on the ground, and Werner and Jeff stood with

empty weapons, like beasts at bay, waiting for the last.

Cassilis shouted an order to Manuel, and the flight of arrows ceased. He turned to the two men, who were standing side by side, prepared to fight hand to hand till the end.

"Why did you break faith?" he asked. "Is this Werner? Who's that?"

I told him.

"Why did you break faith? Where's Houston? Miss Raymond trusted to your honor to release Poindexter in return for her communication."

I listened in amazement, for, remember, that this was the first inkling I had that the letter Houston received had come from Mercedes. Ideas began to flow swiftly in my head.

"What do you mean? What communication?" asked Werner in his heavy, harsh voice.

"Why, I mean the letter she sent, giving you information as to the Fish in return for Poindexter's release. She trusted to your honor, the honor of thieves and murderers! That's why I'm here, fools that you are."

Werner uttered a deep oath. He had received an ugly flesh wound in the neck, and the blood was running from it. Mechanically he mopped at it with a handkerchief, while he let forth a string of horrible oaths.

"Houston! By —, Houston! It was Houston got the letter, by —! You ask me why I broke faith! I got no letter. Houston got it, by —, Houston!" His voice broke almost into a whimper;

he was so passionately moved. Houston had the secret, and had fled and left him to his fate, left him to perish in this attack. This was his final, his crowning act of treachery. He sobbed out the words in a terrible way.

"Houston's gone?" asked Cassilis. "It's Houston I want, not you. Where's Houston?"

"Houston's got the secret. Houston's got the Big Fish," cried Jeff, realizing suddenly, and cursing like his chief.

"Where's Houston? When did he go?" demanded Cassilis, and received no answer from the two infuriated men. It was I who told him.

"Then he's had all these hours' start. He has the secret, and only Miss Raymond knows it besides him. We must go back to her."

"Where is she?" I asked, surprised at nothing now.

"About two hours distant, in a safe place. We must go back to her."

"Yes," I said, for I longed to do that, "but these men can go free."

He stared at me. "Why?" he asked. "Well, if you like. They're not Houston."

"I'm going to tell them where Houston is," I said.

Werner had ceased his curses, and was mopping his neck. He heard the word Houston.

"Let me put my hands on that man —!"

It was spoken with horribly constricted passion.

"You shall," I said. "After all, there must be some executioner. Fate demands instruments."

In the gorge where our camp had been destroyed were several gulches, which debouched upon the main channel, and added to the volume of the torrent. Mercedes and I had proceeded up one of these to the black lake of which I have written, the lake that lay in the circle of hills, and dribbled its waters into the cañon. It would take nearly two hours to reach the lake, and Houston must have arrived there practically at nightfall. He could hardly have recovered the treasure during the night; all he could have done was to make exploration and preparation. He was probably engaged at that very moment, heedless of all else.

"The Fish lies in the lake high up in the third ravine on the left side of the gorge yonder," I said, plainly and slowly. "You will find Houston there."

Werner put a hand on my arm. "Is this genuine?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Then, if it is genuine, give me arms," he said fiercely.

"You shall have arms," I said.

"Yes," said Cassilis gravely, "you shall have arms, if you are quit of this place within ten minutes."

"Give me arms and a mule, and I'll go within two," said Werner. He waddled off, and he stopped to call back to us: "I'll play your game. You can leave it to me"; and then he and Jeff were lost in the darkness.

Cassilis said suddenly: "You sent him. I had reserved that for myself. If you knew —!"

"Dick, I guess," I replied. "Yes, I sent him. We do not want our hands in this."

"But the Fish!" he exclaimed.

"We do not want the Fish," I said soberly. "There is a curse on the Fish. There are things in life more valuable and more precious than the Fish. Let the Fish lie where it is appropriate for it to lie — in the waters of the Black Lake."

"But they will get it, these men, one or other of them," he protested.

"I wonder."

He was silent a moment, and then his duties as leader of the party recalled him to a sense of responsibility.

We spent an hour in doing what was necessary, in burying the dead, and in succouring the wounded, and then we got together the remnant of the mules, and, collecting the Indians, moved down the valley. It was not until then that I was able to have any connected talk with Cassilis. You will remember that I had last seen him stumbling by the stream, and had lost him down the face of a cataract. Well, here is his story.

"When I was sent on by Houston, on that specious plea of 'trigging' the ground to get bearings, I crossed the next 'nullah,' as they call those rocky valleys in India, and wound over the face of the hill. I fancied I could see you as I looked back."

"I saw you," I said.

"Well, we went on for some time under Diego's direction, and I could not help wondering what on earth a half-breed Indian could know about sur-

veying, or topographical measurements. But that did n't very much occupy my mind. Presently Diego gave an order which resulted in the Indian's trailing out in another direction, and leaving us, while we continued our way down the side of the hill on which we were. That made me curious, and I asked Diego what we were after, adding that we could not now take any observations of your place, as you were not in sight. He explained that we were to get to the top of a hill a little farther, where we should be in full view, and able to do what was necessary. So my suspicions, which had never really reached the height of suspicions, abated, and I went cheerily on.

"The next thing I was aware of was a blow from behind, and after that I knew no more."

Cassilis paused and drew a long breath. "My God, what evil creatures! An unarmed and harmless man, your associate and partner — stabbed from behind! The foul creature undoubtedly left me for dead, and piled a cairn, as he thought, upon my lifeless body. I don't know how long I remained there, nor how I managed to survive. The man returned at dark, like a bird of prey, to feast on what he imagined to be the carrion he had left." Cassilis paused again. "I have, in thinking it over, come to the conclusion that he returned to rifle my pockets, which he had forgotten. That must have been the reason, unless he came to assure himself that I was dead, which is not so likely. Anyway, the removal of the stones, and the disturbance had the odd effect of bringing back consciousness to me. I cannot remember more than struggling to my feet, and see-

ing a figure approaching me. In my faint condition, I only recognized in this a danger. You say it was you who called to me. To me it was Diego, and I fled from him with all the force of the vitality I could command in my broken body. I must have gone over the cliff, but fallen only a little way, and the cold water roused me from my torpor.

“I don’t know how I succeeded in getting down the face of the cliff. I retain only a vague recollection of my wanderings that terrible night. Remember, I had a dangerous knife wound which, it was found out afterwards, just missed a vital place. But I think the cold water or — I don’t know what — saved my life by stopping the hemorrhage. I was in a state of half-consciousness all the time, and I suppose, indeed I have no doubt, I should have succumbed, if the Indians had not come upon me. As a matter of fact, they found me stretched out upon the rocks more dead than alive. It had been my last effort.

“They carried me to their village huts, and carefully tended me. Jack, I owe my life to those poor Indians, a simple, primitive folk who trace their origins to the ancient Incas, and who regard as sacred anything connected with their ancient history and their ancient religion. That was what maddened them about the priest.”

“The priest!” I echoed. “Was it those Indians who rescued you?”

He nodded. “The Indians of Astartok. I was lying in one of the huts when Houston was searching among them for the priest. I was concealed by

my Indian friends, who feared this white man and his gang. The Cholo Indians were strange to them. They have no racial affinities. Yes, I lay there, and came slowly back to life. The wound healed rapidly, but it is by no means well yet. But events forced me to action. I learned, one way and another, of Houston's doings, and of Werner. I even gathered that you were still with the gang, and I wondered, realizing that Houston must have marked both of us out for death. I could, of course, get no word to you, for I had nothing to write with, and the Indians' language was unknown to me. But presently I found that the village was in a terrible state of excitement, and I succeeded in discovering why. Ingres, their chief, who had the sacred duty of looking after the temple ruins, had been murdered; and the murderer was one of the white men.

"That is about all, except this. One day a strange Indian appeared in the village, and I recognized him at once as Manuel. You may guess how eager and delighted I was to see him. I obtained all the news of Miss Varley — I mean Miss Raymond — and Mrs. Chester from him, and learned of the attack, and what had befallen you. He had escaped from the pit in which you were overwhelmed, and was casting about for some way to aid his mistress. That had brought him to the Indian village. And see how fortune favored his errand in the nick of time. He found the Indians thirsting for vengeance, and he promised them what they wanted.

"They fitted out a hurried expedition, and departed, and I went with them. Then this surprise

followed. Manuel, hanging about these scoundrels' camp to reconnoiter for operations, came upon Miss Raymond and Mrs. Chester making their escape."

"It was Coop," said I.

"Yes, Coop!" he said. "I shall never deny again the possibility of miracles. My rescue was a miracle, and Miss Raymond's escape was a miracle. What has touched that stony heart?"

"Coop is not of that class," I said, for I had begun to understand the cockney. "He is not a ruffian, nor even a villain by nature. He is only what he would call 'a sport'!"

"Well, anyway, he did one good action, which shall go to his credit. Manuel took us to the ladies' hiding-place, which was snug enough in a cave, and there I learned more, and that you were still in the hands of the gang, and about that torture. If I had one debt to pay before, Jack, now I had two. We set out, found the camp unsuspecting of anything, made our nocturnal assault and—here we are."

As he finished, he turned and listened, as did I. There was a sound behind us, a voice rising out of the darkness. We had been traveling for the better part of an hour now, and we stood in wonder as to what or who this could be. The next moment a mule blundered down on us, and Coop's voice called out.

"I say, who the devil are you? I'm lost. I don't know where the deuce— Hold the beast, some one."

The mule staggered, and the man fell off in a

heap against me. I helped him to his feet, but he was very weak, and trembled.

“Oh, it’s Poindexter, is it? I dunno but I’m glad. I’m pretty sick. I got one of those damned arrows in me. Where the dickens is Werner and Co.? Lucky I tumbled on you. I’d no idea where the brute was taking me.”

I examined him, and found he had a flesh wound, and had probably lost blood, but in his already weakened condition this might prove dangerous. We got him back upon the mule, and secured him there, and proceeded on our way. Coop was querulous at first, with an attempt at gaiety, and then fell silent, and, I guessed, unconscious. It was in this way that we reached the cave in which Mercedes and Mrs. Chester had been lodged by the faithful Manuel.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BLACK LAKE

MERCEDES met us at the entrance, and though I could not see her face, I was conscious of a silent exchange between us as our hands met and our spirits mingled. The pulsations of her feeling passed through that contact into my very blood, and I read her soul like an open book.

"You are safe?" she cried ecstatically. "I feared it was too late."

"The danger was for you, dear," I answered. "Yes, we are safe, all of us, and I think no risk can touch us now, not, at least, from those cruel adventurers."

She put her face to mine. "I prayed for you all night," she whispered. "I was ashamed to have left you so. But they told me you were free, and I should find you. That man, Coop, assured me so. How I hate him!"

"Poor devil, he did his best," I said. "He could n't release both of us, even if he had wanted to."

"When I knew," she went on breathlessly, "I was like something mad. I felt I had given you up again to torture. I would have gone back, but Manuel prevented me. And then I thought of sending the secret,

and bidding them free you in return for it. But they played me false, and I sent out Manuel and Mr. Cassilis and the Indians."

"Dearest," I said, "it was Houston," and I told her the story.

She listened gravely, and then sighed. "They had not begun to—to torture you?" she asked wistfully.

"No, or rather they had; for their torture was mental. I feared for you. I was afraid of what they were doing to you. What did they do, dear heart?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "They did nothing. They told me it was you they would—operate on—was the horrible way they put it. They said they would give me till the evening, and then begin. I had determined to give in, but Coop came and set us free, and said you were free also."

"That was it, then," I said, seeing the plan wholly for the first time. "They were using us one against the other. I, too, had made up my mind to tell them even against your wishes, and I would have done so if the news of your escape had n't arrived. It was an ingenious plan, and I think I seem to see the hand of Houston in its cruelty as well as in its ingenuity."

The night was full of stars and peace; the roar of a distant cataract was dulled to a murmur in the ears, and the cool breeze fanned our faces. We spoke of many things, of Cassilis and his miraculous escape; and Mercedes associated Mrs. Chester's name there.

"Freda is another woman," she said softly. "She

is no longer the tragic figure. I am glad — so glad.”

“We can be glad in their gladness,” I said, and then, realizing that I had not told quite all my story, I went on: “When I told Werner about the lake, I had an object. Perhaps I was wrong.”

“You wanted to satisfy him,” she said.

“No; if you think, you will see we had no longer any cause to be concerned with his enmity. He was impotent. I told him the secret; and I gave him arms.”

She was silent a moment, and I was afraid. There was nothing in the world I dreaded so much as her disapproval.

“Then they will meet — those men,” she said at last, slowly. “What will happen? I don’t know — I think — Dearest, I have n’t any longer a sure mind. Perhaps you did right.”

“If ever any man deserved death for his crimes, it is Houston,” I said.

“Yes, yes, I know. His life is duly forfeit. All my mind is clouded with a doubt. I think — oh!” she said suddenly, holding on to me. “I don’t know, but I think I want peace in all the world now, peace and forgiveness — even for those terrible men.”

This time it was my turn to be silent a little; and then I said: “You’re right, as always.” I turned.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’m going to undo the mischief I did,” I said. “I’m going to the Black Lake.”

She cried out at that, dear heart, to have all her peace disturbed. But I insisted, and, calling up

Manuel, I made preparations hastily for departure. We took two mules, and, as we were setting out, Mercedes joined us, and announced her intention of coming with us; nor would anything I could say dissuade her. Cassilis we left in charge of the cave, for he was still very weak, and Mrs. Chester was tending him, and the unfortunate Coop.

The night was far spent when we started, and dawn was across the eastern peaks when we defiled through the gully, and entered the basin in which the lake lay. The dark water lapped silently on the rocky beach from which Mercedes and I had formerly surveyed it. It had still that ominous look, that brooding sense of oppression affecting the spirit.

"It was under that cliff," said Mercedes. "That is where my father sank the treasure. There is a ledge there, his letter said, one fathom deep, and he sank all the treasure there and covered it with stones."

We moved towards the cliff she pointed out. No one was visible — nothing with life in it as far as the eye could see, on the shores, and on the enviroing chain of heights which rose about the lake. The cliff was black and jagged, and curled over at the summit, but a slip of foreshore ran between it and the water, and gave us access to the hiding-place of the Big Fish. We peered down. The rocks about us were splashed with water, and mud was scattered everywhere. It was evident that some one had been here and at work.

"These are Houston's traces," I said. "He has been here. The question is whether he has succeeded.

It is odd that no one is visible. I had certainly expected to find signs of Werner."

Mercedes was peering down into the water. "It is dark," said she. "I can see nothing. What if he has found the treasure?"

She looked at me doubtfully, almost with regret upon her face. I bent down and peered into the lake, but my eyes could not penetrate the obscurity. I went back to the open, and hunted about until I found a pole which had been the branch of a tree that grew in the sheltered hollows; and, armed with this, I returned and probed the waters. The pole went down into the deeps until I had exhausted the length, and still I had not touched bottom. I stood up.

"Are you sure the ledge was here?" I asked Mercedes.

She was positive. "I can repeat my father's letter almost word for word," she said. "'On a ledge of rock just under the curling cliff upon the left hand of the pass as you enter.' There can be no mistake about that, can there?"

"No," I assented, and inquired: "Were there any other particulars for guidance?"

"Only this," said she. "The ledge was a fathom down, as I have told you."

A fathom! My pole was at least ten feet long, and the water was still unplumbed. I reached a conclusion.

"The ledge has broken away," I said. "It is no longer here. Possibly the water has sapped it, corroding the rock, which seems of a soft material." I

examined the cliff. It was of a marly nature. "Yes," I went on, "the ledge has given way under the action of the water, and has sunk in the lake. Heaven knows how deep is the water here. It does not shoal anywhere apparently."

Was that then the solution, we asked ourselves mutely: that the Big Fish was sunk in the abysmal depths of this dreadful lake, lost to the sight of man, and beyond his recovery? I looked along the broken line of cliffs and dark headlands. The wind in those quarters prevailed from the east, and came down the pass upon the waters of the lake. The scour of the water would go westward and along the headlands where the rock was, as I could see, already much undermined in parts. That body of water would move inwards, and drive or carry its sediment and débris with it. We moved away from the spot, full of our own private reflections.

"What do you think has happened?" asked Mercedes.

I shook my head. "I will explore a little farther with Manuel. It is clear that the treasure has eluded Houston, but where is Werner?"

I found a little, quiet recess where I established her and the mules, and then I proceeded with Manuel up the hills to the right of the lake.

We had not been gone more than half an hour when I was startled by the swift and sudden rising of something in front, and a hideous vulture swept on its wide wings toward heaven. I watched it float and drift, and hang above the black waters. It seemed somehow to characterize the place, to be emblematic

of what the scene stood for. Then I recovered my thoughts, and walked on, and there was Diego's dead body stretched out in the gray light, his evil face to the sky. He had been shot at close range, the first victim of Werner's vengeance.

As I stood considering this first element of the tragedy, Manuel called to me and pointed. I followed his finger, and I thought I discerned a moving figure across the lake on the cliffs about three-quarters of a mile away. Leaving the half-breed to his solitary resting-place, we retraced our steps and descended to the pass, where I found Mercedes safe, but anxious. I reassured her, said nothing of the fate of Diego, and told her that we had finished our exploration in that direction, and were trying the other side of the lake.

It took us nearly half an hour to reach the headland on which we had seen the figure, for the ground was very rough, and we had to ascend and descend many times. But at last we attained a point above abrupt cliffs in a little bay in that shore-line, and we looked down at the water. The headland abutted into it, and descended in a series of rude steps almost to the water's edge. Upon the lowest ledge was a man whose identity I determined at once. It was Houston, and he seemed busy over some operations. I saw him throw out what I took to be a line, as if he were sounding. I had some notion of what he was about. As I have said, the scour of the water under the strength of the easterly winds had washed out these cliffs and headlands, and would carry down on that side of the lake the detritus from above.

Houston had been shrewd enough to see this, and, having failed to recover the Fish from the ledge which had disappeared, was looking for it lower down, where the tides might trawl it.

While these considerations were passing in my mind, Manuel was exploring in the neighborhood, and presently, with a grunt, he drew my attention to the hills farther to the west. On the crest of one of these two figures were advancing, who could be no other than Werner and Jeff. The former's odd, square-built body was unmistakable.

I guessed now what had happened. Werner had no knowledge as to the exact point where the Fish had been deposited, and having arrived in the night, had explored at random, chance taking him up the hills on the right. Here the wretched Diego had been encountered, despatched by Houston, no doubt, upon some errand, and he had been killed out of hand. Werner and his companion had then continued their journey in search of Houston, and had thus made a circuit of the lake. We saw them now returning on the final arc.

I think they espied Houston just about this time. They had been moving in a leisurely manner before, as men worn out through being afoot all night; but now they quickened their steps, and plunged down into a trough in the hills at a run. We lost sight of them here, but it was clear to us that they would make for the headland on which Houston was. Calling to Manuel to follow, I began to go along the cliff at a rapid rate. My idea was to reach Houston, and warn him, but I had the vaguest notion of my

future intentions. I don't think I saw beyond that almost instinctive mission. I went as fast as I could for the uneven nature of the ground, but when I reached the next height, I saw that Werner and his companion were nearer to the headland than I was, and must of necessity reach it before me. I began to run, stumbling over the boulders, and as I ran I shouted. It was some time before they heard me, but it did not check them more than for a moment. Jeff shaded his eyes and stared up at me, and then, with a gesture to his companion, began to hasten. They disappeared round a bend on the hill, Werner rocking and rolling grotesquely.

I put on all the speed I could, and got to the summit of the headland as the two were tumbling down the rough slope beyond. I shouted again, and though I thought my voice must have waked the dead, though its echoes volleyed from the crags, Houston paid no heed. He was stooped over the water playing something — a line. It flashed through my mind, in the grim, humorous way in which such things do, that he was baiting a line for the Fish that lay at the bottom of the lake.

I shouted, but there was no response; and I descended precipitately to the ledge below. By this time Werner and Jeff were very near their victim. Again I called, and this time something troubled Houston in his preoccupation. I dared not see a man go to his death like that. Houston heard, and turned, and saw his enemies. They had now reached the ledge on which he stood. I saw him put his hand in his pocket, and pull it out. There was a

sharp report, and Jeff, who had been leading Werner, stumbled and fell on his face. The next moment Werner fired. I don't know if he hit, but, at any rate, Houston did not drop. He levelled his revolver again, snapped it ineffectually, and hurled it aside. Then he drew a knife, and made a rush at his enemy.

Werner had fired three times, but each time failed to put Houston out of action. He fired hastily as he ran, and may have missed. Houston's way was surer. As the two men collided, he struck. The huge, unwieldy frame of Werner crushed him like a shell, in that impact. The pace at which Werner had come up carried him on. He fell on the edge of the rock with his powerful arms cracking the life out of Houston, and the two rolled, locked in this death-struggle, over the verge of the ledge, and down into that soundless water with a heavy splash. It was as if it had opened to receive them; and then it closed upon them for ever. A few bubbles issued to the surface and broke, and then there was stillness. The Black Lake resumed its brooding silence.

When I had made sure that Jeff also had passed beyond human aid, we turned to go back. Fate had decided that our mission should prove a failure. Was I sorry? Did I reproach myself? I have had my doubts sometimes, but I have none now. These men's lives were forfeit, and they perished by each other's hands. If I had not freed Werner, might not the evil have been greater? The responsibility rested on their own blood-stained shoulders. If any be mine, I will willingly bear it.

And so the Big Fish rests in that black and somber lake where the protagonists of the tragedy lie also. I never regretted the decision we came to, — not to attempt to recover it. For all the treasure I want I have — in my wife; and I think, indeed, I know, Cassilis is of the same opinion.

We made a comfortable journey down to the coast, with Coop slowly getting back his health.

“Bad luck! Second time I’ve come down this way!” he said; but his spirits were unperturbed, and when he had heard the story, or such of the story as I deemed it well for him to hear, he remarked reflectively: “What a rum end!” and added cheerfully: “Anyway, we’ve had a run for our money”; which, when you come to think of it, was an odd summary of the terrible venture.

THE END

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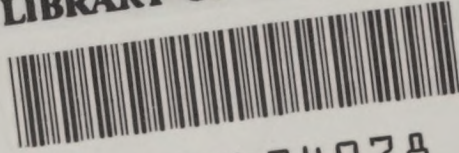
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